

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

25¢

APR.



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FEATURE NOVEL

- **THE SIXGUN SIX**
by **ROBERT L. TRIMNELL**



- **BUFFER RANGE**
by **MARVIN DeVRIES**

- **MOUNTAIN BLOOD
RUNS HOT!**
by **ALLAN K. ECHOLS**

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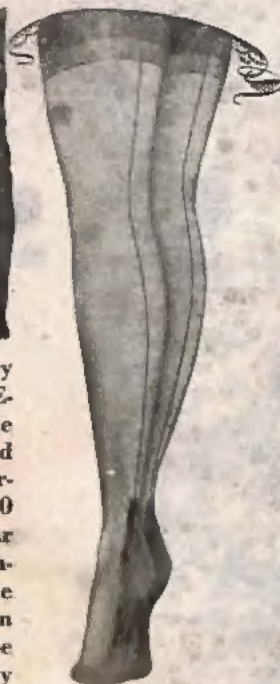
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IT LOOKED LIKE AN EASY SHOT UNTIL...



WHAT
THE...?

HOLD IT! THAT DEER'S
WEARING A COLLAR!

AFTER TWO DAYS' HUNTING IN THE
NORTH WOODS, IT LOOKS LIKE
STEVE AND BILL HAVE FOUND
THEIR BUCK, BUT THEN...



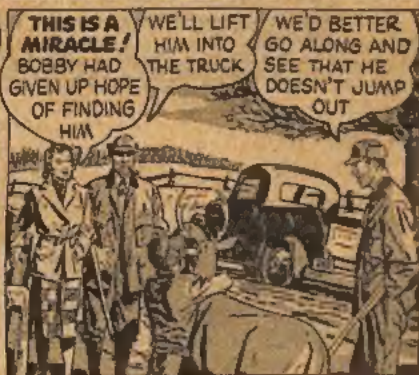
BY GOSH,
HE'S TAME
AS A DOG!

WONDER
WHAT THAT
TAG SAYS



IT SAYS: I'M
BOBBY HOPKINS'
PET DEER. PLEASE
TAKE ME HOME

WONDER
WHERE HE
LIVES



THIS IS A
MIRACLE!
BOBBY HAD
GIVEN UP HOPE
OF FINDING
HIM

WE'LL LIFT
HIM INTO
THE TRUCK

WE'D BETTER
GO ALONG AND
SEE THAT HE
DOESN'T JUMP
OUT



DEER WON'T BE
MOVIN' MUCH TILL LATE
AFTERNOON. WHY NOT
KNOCK OFF AND HAVE
A BITE WITH US?

I'M SOLD.
SUPPOSE WE
COULD CLEAN
UP A BIT,
TOO?



YOU'RE IN FOR A SLICK
SHAVE, STEVE. THIS
THIN GILLETTE SURE
SKIMS 'EM OFF QUICK
AND EASY!

I ALWAYS
USE THEM.
THEY'RE
PLENTY
KEEN



WE'VE ALL THE
ROOM IN THE WORLD.
WHY NOT FINISH YOUR
WEEK OUT HERE?

IF YOU'RE SURE
WE WON'T BE
CROWDING
YOU

TALL AND
CERTAINLY
HANDSOME!

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NEXT ISSUE
PUBLISHED
APRIL 4TH



VOLUME 44

APRIL, 1951

NUMBER 2

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Lured by the smell of silver they came—but it was the wrong law-dog's town!

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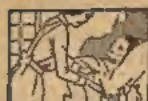
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◆ By L. C. DAVIS ◆

ZEBULON MONTGOMERY PIKE discovered the famed Rocky Mountain peak that bears his name, but he never climbed it! He didn't give it his name, either. That was left to another explorer.

Although Pike's chief claim to fame was his exploration of the vast wilderness west of the Mississippi in the early 1800's, the dashing young officer had a brilliant career in the army east of that river.

Soldiering was in his blood, for his father had served in the Revolution as an officer and was commandant at Fort Washington, on the site of the present-day city of Cincinnati, at the time young Zeb signed up. "Mad Anthony" Wayne of Revolutionary fame was his first tutor and he progressed rapidly under his leadership.

Young Pike was transferred from one army post to another, finally being placed in charge of Fort Kaskaskia, near St. Louis, in 1805. By this time he was a lieutenant and had been noticed by General Wilkinson, commander of the western army, who sent him on an expedition into the Upper Mississippi Valley.

One of Pike's tasks was to find the source of the Father of Waters, which he mistakenly thought was Lake Leech. However, he effected a treaty with the Indians in the territory now occupied by Minneapolis and St. Paul, which led to the establishment of Fort Snelling, an important frontier post.

"Very good!" commended his superior officer when the 26-year-old lieutenant returned with his small party of men.

The general had dreams of an empire. He beamed on the handsome, energetic young officer.

"And now I have more important
(Please continue on page 8)

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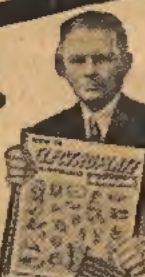
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 6)

things for you. I'm sending you west!"

Little knowing that he might be an unwilling dupe in Wilkinson's scheme to colonize the Southwest and possibly make it independent of the United States, young Pike was pleased.

"At your service, sir! When do I start?"

"As soon as you can get a party of men together. On your way up the Missouri you are to liberate some Osage Indian captives in Western Missouri. Further instructions await your departure."

Up the Big Muddy to the mouth of the Osage, then up the Osage the party progressed. When the liberation was accomplished, they proceeded to the Chouteau trading post near the Missouri-Kansas line. A visit with the Pawnees near the Kansas-Nebraska line on the Republican river marked their northernmost penetration before the party headed south toward the Arkansas river.

The expedition ascended the Arkansas into Colorado, and it was near Pueblo, in the year 1806, that Pike first saw the "small blue cloud" that now bears his name. The party halted in admiration.

"What a grand peak that is!" Pike exclaimed.

"Is that your name for it, Lieutenant?" one of his men asked.

"Why not?" he laughed. "Let's just call it Grand Peak."

"Are we going to climb it?" another asked.

"No. Not now. We have other mountains to climb."

One of Pike's objectives was discovery of the headwaters of the Arkansas. When that was accomplished, the expedition headed south over the Sangre de Cristo range. It was mid-winter and the going was rough. This time they were in search

(Please continue on page 10)



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(Continued from page 8)

of the headwaters of the Red River, but after many weary miles of struggle through mountain passes drifted with snow they ended up in the San Luis Valley in the Rio Grande basin instead.

Was Pike spying on the Spaniards? Well, the Spaniards thought so, and halted the expedition. They were very polite about the matter, however.

"The governor at Santa Fe would so much like to meet you, señor. Eet ees not often Americanos accord us the honor."

THE governor was less polite than the arresting party. He gruffly ordered Pike and his men to be escorted to Chihuahua, which provided further opportunity of exploration. But if they expected to go any deeper into the Spanish domain they were doomed to disappointment, for here they were shipped back to the United States under armed escort and ordered never to return.

Promotions came slowly in those days, and although Pike had been elevated to the rank of captain while he was deep in the wilderness of Colorado, he chafed at the delay. He was a man of action, who believed in himself and undertook hazardous ventures at great risk, and felt the public was slow with its plaudits, the War Department tardy with promotions. He was indignant.

"I'll resign my commission!" he said. "The New Jersey Militia wants me to lead them."

The War Department gave in and stepped up his rank another notch—to that of major. He was assigned first to Fort Bellefontaine and then to famed Fort McHenry at Baltimore.

A book came off the press in 1810 which narrated Pike's wilderness wanderings, written by himself. It started him toward becoming a world figure.

(Please continue on page 12)

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(Continued from page 10)

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"If we go into Canada you will hear of my fame—or my death!" were the prophetic words he wrote to his old friend Wilkinson. The Colonel's 15th regiment was ordered to return to Plattsburg for the winter after a trial foray into Quebec. During the winter at Plattsburg he trained his men rigidly, and by the spring of 1813 they were ready to take part in a double-barreled offensive against the British.

At Sackets Harbor, where he arrived in March of that year, Colonel Pike was breveted a brigadier general and made inspector general of the northern armies. Sackets Harbor and Buffalo were the jumping off places for the offensive across Lake Ontario, and General Pike led the assault against York (now Toronto).

A successful landing was made on April 27th, the British being forced back into the woods and with their commander hoisting the white flag of surrender. But General Pike was mortally wounded in an explosion and died on Lake Ontario while being carried back to Sackets Harbor.

There he is buried, and the mayor of that town is resisting all efforts of the Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce to remove his grave to the top of the broad peak that bears his name.

Zebulon Pike never got around to climbing "Grand Peak," but Dr. Edwin James did, just a few years after Pike discovered it. For a while it was known as James Peak, then General John C. Fremont, the famous explorer, named it "Pike's Peak" in 1843, and the name still stands.

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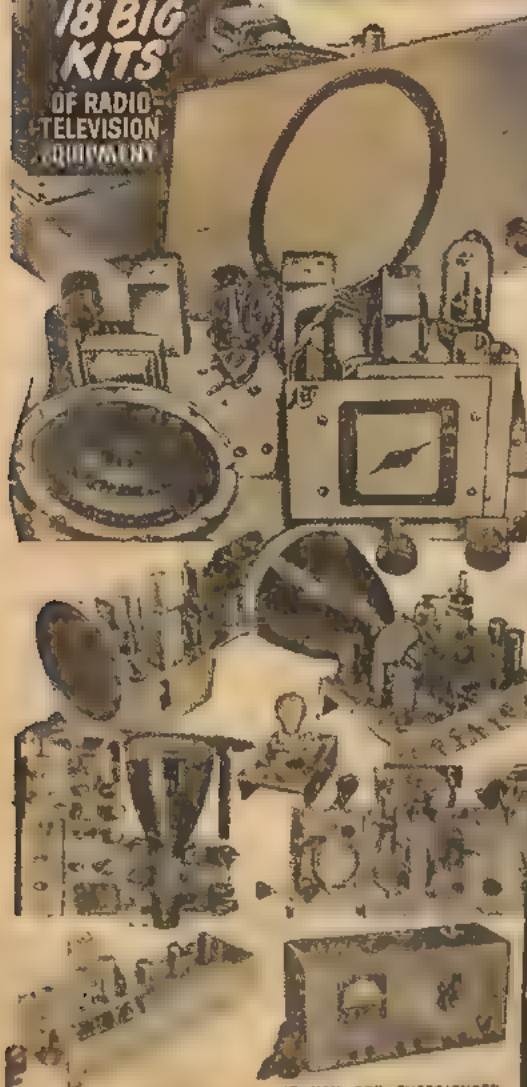
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CHAPTER

1

Trap for John Law

The stage went boiling out of Haytown in a smoky cloud of alkali dust. The driver, perched with his hat cocked to one side, waved his whip and yelled at the six-horse team to be sure everybody saw him. The horses broke into a gallop and everybody along the street stopped and stared. Some waved their hats and shouted. Dad Peterson, the driver, acted like he didn't see, just yelled louder and cracked his whip like a fiend from hell.

As soon as they were out of Haytown and into sagebrush country, he dropped the whip into its socket and took a twist of raw leaf from his pocket. He turned to the big, rawboned man behind him, clinging to the luggage rack.



A furtive movement caught his eye, and he began to run.

By **ROBERT L.**

TRIMMELL

It was just one shot, fired in haste. One shot, but it could throw Marshal Dufany into his own Clayton jail—and betray the whole rich boomtown into the grasping hands of . . .

THE SIXGUN SIX



"Chaw, Todd?"

"Thanks, but I'll smoke, Dad."

Peterson shoved the stem end of the plug into his mouth. He gnawed away at it for some moments, being the kind that considered it unsporting to cut a raw leaf to size with a knife.

"You'll water up at Gila Crick, Dad?"

Again Peterson turned. Todd Dulany was a rangy man of thirty, in cow-country clothes except for a loose brown coat. A star-shaped badge was partly hidden by being pinned to the lining, but the coat was unbuttoned. *City Marshal, Clayton*, the badge read. But Peterson was not looking at that. It was the deep creases in Dulany's high forehead.

"What's that about Gila Crick? What you care if I water the hosses there?"

"I just wanted to know."

Peterson went "Hump!" and turned around to watch the team. They didn't need much watching, for they knew the feel of every inch of the route. They traveled no other than the forty miles between Haytown and Clayton, the silver town in the mountains, with occasional trips on to Puma.

"Twenty miles ahead," Peterson grumbled, "and all you got to talk about is is we goin' to water the hosses at Gila Crick. Hell, reckon it's the only crick between here and Clayton. Ain't it, now?"

"Guess," Dulany said.

"Guess, hell," the driver grumbled, and lashed his whip out over the six-horse team.

"Gila Crick's about half way from Haytown to Clayton, right?" the marshal said. "A long walk either way, and nothing but sage brush and jackrabbits between?"

The oldster switched around suddenly. "What in blazes you mean by that? Course it's a long walk, only happens we're ridin'. What we care how far it is to walk? Damn if somethin' ain't eatin' you, Todd!"

Dulany didn't answer. He hooked his boots under the rail of the baggage rack to steady him while he got papers and tobacco from his shirt pocket. He wasn't used to building a smoke on the top of a jolting stage. Inside, now—but he stopped thinking about that. Maybe he'd been building smokes inside his office for too long, and had forgotten how he used to brag he could make a quiry in the rain,

riding that bug-eyed bronc he had back in the horse-breaking days. That bronc wasn't broken himself, they used to say. But that didn't mean Todd Dulany couldn't break a horse down to size for the Methodist preacher—who was from Vermont and thought a horse was what pulled a plow.

Gettng soft, he told himself. Thirty years old and wishing he were riding inside the stage.

"Hey, Todd."

The oldster dropped his whip butt in the socket again and turned around, one leg cocked up over the back of his seat. They were in flat sage country, and as long as he had the reins loose in his hands, the horses couldn't hurt anything if they tried.

"Them passengers, Todd. I wouldn't like to meet up sudden with them, some dark night. Boy, not me. Even the girl. She's the kind all silky and purry, and a feller gets dazzled. Then he wakes up in a corner and wonders how he got there." Peterson had the chaw tucked away in his grizzled cheek now, and his jaw rolled slowly, his wind-beared eyes fixed on the deputy. "Say, Todd. Damn if you didn't look awful funny at them six passengers when we was boardin' back to Haytown."

TODD forced a laugh and looked away. Look funny at the passengers? Sure he had. Next, Dad Peterson would be asking why he'd gone to Haytown, and the answer was because of these six passengers. But Dad wasn't going to learn that yet. So he shifted the subject.

"Dad, you love gossip somethin' awful, talkin' like that about six people below." He jerked his thumb down toward the inside of the stage. "But I got a little piece that'll make that long nose of yours curl up!"

Dad rubbed a horny hand over his long nose, a weathered, bulbous affair that made everything else in his face look small, and shot a quick look at Todd. "Yeah?"

"Well, you know jealous old Miz Drimmond is about Ike—"

Peterson's ears seemed to twitch and he moved a bit closer. "Yeah!"

"Well, she was just hoppin' mad, the other day. Ike didn't come home all night."

Peterson shoved back his hat and rubbed his nose and crawled over the back of his

seat. "I be damn'!" He grinned expectantly, and rubbed his hands together.

"It was next morning she found Ike took the job of night watchman at Number Two Shaft, Jackson Mine."

Peterson's jaw dropped. "That all?"

Todd grinned at him. "That's all, you old gossip."

"Hell!" The oldster swiveled around and grabbed his whip and didn't turn around again for five miles.

Dulany didn't like to tease the oldster that way, but he wanted to keep him off the subject of the six passengers. What was going to happen to those six passengers was something he didn't want Peterson involved in. It was Todd's own responsibility.

It was like Samcard Breadon had said. "Todd, you 'can't line 'em up and shoot their heads off like rattlesnakes—which is what they are. You can't do it, but it's what ought to be done."

They'd been sitting at a table in Breadon's saloon. Breadon had turned his palms up when he said that, tightened his big shoulders. "But of course you can't do it. Hangrope law is no law at all."

Samcard Breadon was a big, balding, red-faced and red-handed man, wearing a handsome gray coat and a bunchy, violently colored tie. His eyes were blue, quick, roving. He owned the saloon in Clayton that they called the "Samcard." The drinks were cheap, the games honest. A straight place if there ever was one.

The news had come that day from a friend of Samcard's who ran a place at the railhead. Six strangers, a hard-looking lot, were talking too loudly about the soft thing they'd heard of at the silver town of Clayton. A boomtown, they knew, and one that had been completely untapped by smart people. They figured to take the lid off Clayton. And under the lid, they knew the greenbacks were thick as the squarehead miners.

"This friend of mine," Samcard went on. "He's heard about this outfit. He says they've got everything they need to take a town and wring it dry. Fast guns and big fists, not to mention sleeve cards that jump like grasshoppers. They're smooth, and anybody they can't talk to sleep so they can roll him, they turn the girl loose on. A real charmer, they say, and about as much

scruples as a she-coyote with seven pups."

Samcard spoke with passion. Like Todd, he wanted to keep it a clean town. So far it was. One gambler had taken Todd's offer of until sundown to leave Clayton. A miner was now resting in boothill who had figured to shoot the town up one night, and didn't think Todd Dulany could use the Colt .45 he carried. Others had absorbed Todd's big fists in their faces until they quieted down.

"When they get here," Todd had told Breadon, "I'll give 'em a talk and set 'em right on things."

Samcard had smiled wearily. "No, Todd. My friend says that won't do. Once they're in town, they've got you. But he figured they'd scare if you threw it at them good and hard before they got here."

And at last they worked out a plan. If they looked bad to Todd, he'd stop them from ever getting to Clayton. And in Haytown, when he saw them, he knew they'd be dangerous once they were in Clayton. Too smooth to be thrown out of town for disturbing the peace, or any such charge. There'd be nothing legal you could hang on them.

He had stood there in front of the stage office in Haytown, watching them board the stage. He was leaning against the wall, his eyes narrowed, inspecting them carefully.

A little man with pale hands and snaky fingers, impeccably dressed. A couple of big fellows, one of whom knew his way around, a calm, deliberate type. The other one was a bully-boy. He had shoulders that seemed swollen and a battered face. Then, two lean men that looked like brothers, narrow-faced and with biting, all-seeing eyes.

What could you hold against them? They weren't dressed flashily, or badly. They behaved themselves. They were polite.

And the girl. She was a slender girl with a good figure and a good face—not just pretty, though it was that, too—and nice hazel eyes and brown hair, a slightly up-turned nose, and a dainty smile. But more than that, she was the kind of girl men in the West were proud to defend. She looked innocent and wholesome.

But Todd saw her snap an order at the bully-boy. Her mouth slanted off to one

side and words came spitting out, words that made the big man fumble for his carpetbag and jump hurriedly into the stage.

Samcard's friend was right, Todd thought. You couldn't let them run loose in Clayton. And you couldn't chase them out of town, either.

He sighed and swung up on top of the stage, for they filled the compartment.

AS THEY were approaching Gila Crick, Dad Peterson turned around, at last overcoming his resentment at being pinned down as a gossip.

"Well now, Todd, you jist tell me why you was so inter'sted in Gila Crick? Hey? Now that you can see the hosses tongues hangin' to their knees, and you know we're goin' to stop here and water?"

Todd smiled, even though his chest was tight and his throat like sandpaper, and that not from the dust that had been blasting up at them from twenty-four pounding hoofs.

"I thought I'd look around and hunt some Gila monsters, if it's true what they say about Gila Crick being fringed with 'em. I've heard tell them easterners pay a big price for Gila hides."

"Liar!" the oldster shrieked. "You set there makin' fun of me, damn you, Todd Dulany! I know what you're after. You're after to talk to that purty gal down underneath, when we stop. And I'll tell you her name's Lila Franks, and she's a-travellin' with her brother, George Franks. You ask me if I can't tell a thing or two. I got the passenger list right in my pocket, I have." He blinked, still a bit hurt, and glad to throw his knowledge in the marshal's face.

"Which one's George Franks?" Dulany said.

"How'd I know? Passenger list don't draw no pitchers!" He turned around and growled, "Here's yore blasted Gila Crick ahead, and I hope it's crawlin' with Gilas and one of 'em bites yuh dead, I do." He added in a low growl, "Though I never seed one here."

Gila Crick was a wide arroyo, a terrible torrent in the spring, but with some water all year around. The water kept straggly willows half-alive on its banks. In the spring, the poorly rooted ones were torn out. Those that remained were strong as wire, twisted and gnarled and ragged.

"Gila Crick!" Dad Peterson yelled. "We got to water the hosses, so get out and stretch yore legs and have a drink afore the hosses rile it!" He leaned over and yelled that in the direction of the stage windows. Then he clawed out a hand and dragged the brake on and shouted too loudly at the horses—as though he were in town with a lot of wide-eyed kids watching.

Dulany was on the ground before the door opened. He took his coat off and threw it up on top of the stage, then took his hat off and rubbed the sweat from his forehead. That was to make it look like he'd removed his coat because of the heat, instead of to free his gun for action. He saw the six passengers begin to spill out, and he turned toward the creek, so his eyes wouldn't give him away. Dad Peterson was leading his teams down into the arroyo, pointing the string downstream so they could all water without getting out of harness. He heard the passengers beating dust out of their clothes, and the men stamping around heavily to rid themselves of their stiffness.

Todd waited until Peterson had walked the teams through the water, watered them, led them back to the stage and hitched on the trace chains. Then, as the driver was about to call, "All aboard," Todd moved to the bank of the arroyo and turned quickly toward the passengers. In the same movement he whipped out his Colt, brought it up level, with his thumb riding the hammer down.

"Stand where you are, everybody—including you, Dad."

The group of six had been huddled together. Now they broke apart suddenly, and the two thin ones threw up their hands. The other didn't react so quickly, just stared curiously at him, and Peterson called:

"Have you gone nuts, Todd? Put thet gun away and get onto the stage!"

Todd said, "Stand where you are, Dad, and don't claw your gun or I'll blow your head off, too." He picked up calmness as he spoke, and eyed them coolly. The girl, pretty and doll-like in a long green travel dress and a tiny green hat, had a hand over her throat, as though surprised into that position. Yet her eyes were level, calm.

"I don't understand this," she said, in a quick voice, irritated.

Todd was eyeing the little gambler, who seemed fidgety, chewing his lip. But Todd's gun roamed over all of them, including Dad, and slowly their palms rose and showed pink toward him.

"Get this," he growled at them. "I knew you were coming. We don't want wolf packs in Clayton. The miners have trouble holding their earnings as it is. You're halfway between Clayton and Haytown. You're walking back to Haytown. This way you'll keep out of my jail, at least. Just figure yourselves lucky it's this way. Dad—" he called. "Get your teams ready. You and me are goin' on."

"Just a minute."

It was the smother of the two big men speaking, holding a big open hand toward Todd. "Isn't this illegal? You've no right to—"

As the big fellow spoke, Todd lined the maneuver up for what it was. At the other end of the line, the little gambler was taking off his derby hat and rubbing sweat from his forehead. Then a small white hand darted into the hat.

A hand into a hat—but it was a gun movement, just the same. A jerking dash and the little gambler's eyes narrowed quickly as his feet firmed down into the ground. He didn't have to fling the hat aside. Todd knew the hideout gun was there. He saw the nickled barrel flash in the sunlight even as he swung and triggered.

The Colt leaped against his palm. The derby hat exploded in orange flame.

It was too late, for the sledge blow of Todd's .45 slug caught the little man in the chest and threw him over backwards, rolled him twice in the dust and left him lying there like a rag doll. The nickel-plated hat gun clacked on a rock.

As soon as he'd fired, Todd swung back to the others, in time to arrest three men's hands, two diving for open hip guns and one plunging in to an armpit.

"Up with the hands and turn your backs to me!" Todd snapped. "You too, lady. I don't like that bulge in your handbag!" They turned. Todd raced over to the little gambler. He was lying on his back. Already the blood had stopped pumping out of the hole in his chest. Gun in hand, Todd ran to the stage and climbed up a wheel to the top. "Let's go, Dad."

Maybe the oldster was too shocked to resist. He let the brake off with a quick jerk and snapped his whip, and the stage lurched down into the arroyo.

Todd pitched off the baggage as they climbed the other side. The last he saw of the people on the banks of Gila Crick, they were in a little group, staring after him. All but the little gambler on the ground, whose eyes were glazing, and he saw nothing at all.

FOR fifteen minutes the stage rolled on, neither of the men on top speaking. Dad Peterson sat staring ahead, not even chewing. He seemed to have lost his tobacco. At last he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a flat pint bottle. He drank an inch off it, blew out his breath, wiped his eyes with his sleeve. He handed the bottle to Todd.

He took it, and stared at the whiskey sloshing around as the stage jolted. At last he uncorked it, drank off an ounce or so, and replaced it in the old driver's pocket.

"You gone crazy as a billy goat, Todd!"

Todd had taken the cleaning rod from his coat pocket, and was swabbing his gun barrel. He shivered, in spite of the heat. His mouth was agonizingly dry now. He kept telling himself he'd done a crazy thing, but how'd he know the gambler would pull a gun?

That was bad, very bad. If he'd just set them afoot, there'd have been no trouble. But the little man pulled his gun. And like it was planned, the others had been reaching, as though the little gambler was to fire and draw off Todd's attention, while the others had time to aim and blow him into the arroyo. And feverish as his thoughts were, he realized that no law could have touched them. If a man, even a lawman, pulls a gun on you, you've got every right to defend yourself.

Sickening, he realized the spot he'd be in if they came to Clayton. And they had a witness, Dad Peterson, whose word wasn't for sale.

"Todd, you ever look out through the bars in your jail? Better go in and try it so's you can get used to it. Why, they'll have you juggled afore you can turn around!"

Todd clutched the oldster's arm. "Dad, they're crooks and killers, the worst kind!"

"Prove it," Dad retorted.

Todd was in agony as they rolled on toward Clayton.

CHAPTER

2

Bully-Boy Cray

Clayton was a new unpainted town, so new that most of the wood still gleamed yellow. It wound through a long canyon, on the sides of which were the mine entrances. The Forlorn Peaks towered over the town, shadowing it, and the smoke from the smelter hung over it like an umbrella, except on windy days, when the wind screamed down the canyon and threatened to blow the whole flimsy town out to the cactus flats.

For all that, it was a tamed town, and most of the taming was due to Todd Dulany. The job of peace officer hadn't been wanted at first, when Clayton was still a brawling boom camp, when Injun whiskey went at ten dollars a bottle and there was a row of cracked heads each morning.

Todd had been recovering from a broken hip, a souvenir of the breaking of a crazy black mustang, when he heard Clayton wanted peace. He'd had enough of mustangs. He saw no future in them but another broken hip.

He rode herd on Clayton, and it was partly that rough-handed, gun-drawing fear he blasted into it that tamed it. Also, there was the coming of families, and not every man was spending his evenings in places like Samcard Breadon's saloon.

With a lump in his throat, Todd watched people wave from the boardwalks as the stage rolled in.

"What we goin' to tell around?" Dad Peterson said. "I know you did what you thought right, Todd, but I ain't goin' to cover for you. Though maybe I'll help shade the story your way."

He jerked the horses to a halt in front of the stage station, forgetting for once to shout and make a big thing of his arrival. Todd switched around and got his feet on the near wheel. He was about to jump down when he saw Samcard Breadon on the porch.

The big saloon keeper had his hands in his pockets, leaning against a wall. As he saw Todd, his big red face seemed to pale,

and he removed his hands, pushed away. He seemed to be startled, but quickly that was gone and he grinned.

Todd jumped down, wondering. In spite of turmoil inside him, he saw that strange action of Breadon's, and he wondered.

Peterson said, "Todd, I'm drivin' on to Puma. I'll forget to talk till I get back—tomorrow."

"Thanks," Todd said. He jumped down. He and Samcard paced off down the boardwalk.

"It went bad?" Breadon said finally.

"One of 'em took a hideout from his hat and I had to let fly. I hit him where you're supposed to when you pull a trigger. Square in the chest."

Breadon shook his head. "Bad." He frowned, still shaking his big head, staring hard down at the boardwalk. At the saloon he said, "Come in and we'll talk it over."

They pushed inside. The place was full of miners, rough, red-shirted men having a quick drink before going home. It was six o'clock, and they were just off shift, laughing, contented with the thought of hot supper waiting at home. A few "howdied" the marshal. He nodded to them and smiled, though it cost an effort. He was glad when Breadon took him off to a quiet corner and had a bottle of whiskey brought over for them.

"Hell," Samcard grunted. "Now, they'll have a lever to pry their way into town. They're smart ones. They won't go back to Haytown now, Todd."

Todd's head jerked up. "You know a lot about 'em."

Samcard's hard blue eyes met his stare. "I got good information on them."

Todd slumped back down. He grasped the bottle when it was brought, and poured himself some whiskey. He didn't hear the merry laughter of the miners, or the chatter of the girls who were befriending the homeless ones, or the steady clack of the roulette wheel in the back of the place.

He was thinking only of the little gambler taking his derby off, wiping his forehead, and his hand darting suddenly into the hat. Then the others, slapping for their guns as soon as Todd swung toward the little gambler.

It was as though they were set and waiting for it, before Todd ever pulled his gun . . .

He didn't drink himself foolish, as he was tempted to. After a while he went over to his office, a cubbyhole with a door and window on the street, behind which was the jail, empty now, and seldom occupied nowadays except for a few Saturday night drunks. He slumped down into his swivel chair, in the darkness, and stared out at the street, at the lights coming out of houses and stores.

For one crazy moment fear seized him, and he thought of running to the livery stable and getting his horse. He sat bolt upright in his chair and the cigarette he was rolling spilled. "Ride away!" he gasped. Then there'd be no facing the five remaining stagecoach passengers, no having to meet Dad Peterson's scowling honesty. He stood up and switched toward the door. Suddenly his body wilted. He sat back down in the chair and wiped nervous sweat from his forehead.

He couldn't run. That would be no good at all.

He sat up most of the night, staring out into the street and figuring how long it would take those five people to walk twenty

miles. Toward morning he slept, leaning back in the chair.

He woke with something flashing in his face. He shook his head, found he was stiff from the cramped position. It was the sun on the window opposite that had wakened him. He sat upright and made himself a cigarette.

A half hour after dawn, they came. Five weary people, limping through the dusty streets, their heads hanging low. He watched them go into the Clayton Hotel.

"Maybe," he growled, "that walk will take some of the starch out of you!"

But that was the only profit he could see in his foolish trip to Haytown.

THAT day he was cursed with a court trial. He'd signed as witness to a claim sale some time back, and the lawyer had been careless in wording the documents. He had to sit in the hot, stuffy courtroom all day, and they never called him for information anyway. All that time, the five outlaws were sleeping it off, and they'd be fresh and ready to meet him in the evening. And all that time his back was tightening

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with nerves, and clammy sweat trickled down his neck. He'd killed a man before witnesses, and the reason for killing didn't add up to a very pretty picture. That's what it all amounted to.

He was at Old Lady Austen's boarding house, where he lived, and half way through his dinner when Samcard Breadon's swamper came in. He said Breadon had to talk to him. Todd couldn't eat after that. Breadon wouldn't have called him if trouble weren't about to pop.

He buckled on his gunbelt and walked slowly through the gathering dusk to the saloon. There were a lot of people in the streets, women doing late shopping, miners heading home. He nodded and tipped his hat to them; the responses were polite and pleasant. Yes, the town was still friendly to its marshal. It didn't know, yet.

There was more noise than usual in the Samcard, and the crowd at the bar seemed thicker. He spied Samcard at his usual corner table, looking somewhat pale. He went to the table and stood there, looking at the crowd, waiting for Breadon to speak.

"There's a bully-boy at the bar, Todd. He's tried starting some fights, seems to be after trouble. And I have a hunch he's one of them. I've seen a couple other strangers that look likely, but I don't know. They don't act like they know the bully-boy, but—"

"He might be asking for the city marshal to throw him out?"

"Looks like it. He's crowin' that his name's Joe Cray and 'No damn lawdog ever laid a hand on me!' That kind."

Todd saw him then. It was the big one with the swollen shoulders. He had a miner's red shirt on now—the gang was fitting him in with the tougher men of Clayton. This business smelled to high heaven of brains, Todd thought. Somebody moving in with it all planned in advance. He thought of the girl. Lily, Dad said her name was. He remembered her snarling at Cray back at Haytown. Was she the brains?

Joe Cray let out a bellowing laugh just then, picked up a chair and smashed it against the bar. It splintered as his giant shoulders put weight behind it. A couple of men jumped out of the way as splinters flew.

"Shere I pay for the chairs!" he bel-

lowed at the crowd. "Chairs is just part of me drinkin' costs!" He bellowed with laughter. "Same as I pay doctor bills for the heads I busts. Hey, where's the boss of this rat hole? I tell him, I'll pay!" He threw the pieces of the chair across the room and people ducked. "Where's the boss?" he bellowed.

"Here," Samcard said, in a low voice.

The giant at the bar turned. "I'll pay yuh! How much a chair?" Then he saw Todd standing by Breadon's table, the star shining on his chest. "The law!" he howled. "Hey, law, come have a drink!"

Todd whispered to Breadon, "I wish you had a bouncer here. He's looking for fight, and that's no good."

Breadon laid a big red hand on his arm. "Todd, you aren't scared of him?"

"No. Only I—well, I'm getting deeper into this thing." He rubbed a nervous hand across his mouth. "Cray's one of them. You guessed right."

Cray came over to them with big, lumbering strides. "Hey, law, ain't you goin' to drink?"

"Yeah, I'll drink." Todd walked beside him back to the bar, his back stiff and sweat dripping down his neck, every nerve hot and jumping. The miners around them were quiet now, seeing a fight coming, and bending their ears to what Cray and their city marshal said.

A whiskey was put in front of him, and Todd drank it off. He turned slowly toward Cray, at his side.

Recognition showed in the other's eyes. He had a fattish, scarred face. A bully-boy's face. He was laughing. He wasn't going to talk about what happened at Gila Crick. Not right now. He was letting that pass. Todd measured him and found Cray had an inch and thirty pounds over him.

"Have another," Cray said, grinning.

"No." Todd said it quickly, knowing they had to break off the farce somewhere.

"You ain't drinkin' with me?"

"No. And you're leaning awful close to where I can arrest you for disturbing the peace." As he said that, Todd backed a step, moved slightly to the left, to clear the bar from his gun hand.

"You want to eat what you just said?" Cray knotted a fist like a ham and shook it at Todd.

Todd saw the other had no visible gun.

He backed another step, dropped his hand on his Colt handle.

"You're under arrest, Cray. Turn around and march out that door."

For a long second there was not a sound in the saloon. Todd found a space had been cleared between them. A half-circle formed out into the saloon, with scores of men listening, waiting for the first move. And suddenly, a cold, bony hand fell on Todd's, clamping his hand down tight on his gun.

"Fight fair, Mister Law. You can see this Cray here has no gun."

Todd turned slightly. Over his shoulder was a pale, thin face—another from the stage! He jerked his hand away, but the man was fast. He snatched the Colt out of the holster and threw it up on the bar.

"Fight fair, Mister Law," he said, grinning brokenly.

And suddenly Joe Cray charged.

DULANY had to forget the pale man behind him, and his lost gun. There was no way out but to fight. A fist came flying up at him. He ducked, ramming himself forward and putting out his left, hooking it in with his shoulders behind it. A fist grazed his ear. His own fist hit the rushing man and jarred. Like a man walking into a tree limb at night, he thought. That's how it hit the bully-boy. It rocked Todd's shoulder. And Bully-Boy Joe Cray lost his legs, spinning, rocketing off crazily into the crowd. He disappeared under legs and coats, and men stumbled and were pushed over him.

It seemed to take a long time for him to get untangled. He came out, though, on his knees, his fists knotted, his face lobstered, a three-inch cut over his left eye. He rubbed blood away with his knotted fist, got up.

"Damn if I won't get yuh!" he howled, and came piling in.

Todd knew his left was the best, his left hooking in. It was a good left, and he was fast and smooth on his feet, and when that left chopped in, there were shoulders behind it. He drove his right out but cut it short and came in hard underneath with the left. It hit something and hit it hard, but the bully-boy was on him, driving those rocky fists into his belly, slamming him back against the bar.

Todd leaped to the side, away, backing

fast. A left came up at him, and then a right. He tried to guard but his hand was brushed aside by the weight behind that fist, and it caught his jaw, blowing holes through the back of his head. He was flying backwards then, racing his feet to try to stand. He heard boots scramble to clear away, then his head hit slats, rattling, parting. The batwings. He kept going, but down flat on his back, skidding across the porch, out into the street.

He got a mouthful of dirt. Got to fight, he told himself, struggling painfully up. His head spun. No, he thought, there isn't that much in a fist. No fist hits that hard all by itself. Too much weight. He got up to the boardwalk, his hands flat on it.

Above, the batwings were open and the hulking form of Cray was silhouetted by the lamp lights inside. Bulging shoulders rose and fell as he panted.

"Hey, Law, come on in!"

There was a roar of laughter echoing hollowly from behind Cray. Todd began climbing the boardwalk, cautiously, for if the big man carried the fight out here, his position was bad. Cray waited, blocking the door.

Suddenly Todd leaped forward, cocking that left fist. Cray knew about it now, and threw up his right. Todd's fist thudded into the man's heavy arm, and he came down solidly on his right foot, leaning forward. He had a good swing that way, and he kicked his left boot up high as he could reach.

With a scream, Cray went over backward. Todd raced on, leaped past him to the bar. A bottle of whiskey was standing there, alone. He clawed out and caught the neck.

Cray was up then. Somebody was yelling, "No kicking! Fight fair, Lawman!" and Todd knew who it was. He grinned savagely as he leaped toward Cray. Cray put out a left hand to guard his head—that's where the bottle would be aimed, he figured.

Todd chopped the bottle in a short, hard crack, and it exploded on the big left fist. Whiskey, blood, broken glass sloshed to the floor, onto a wide open place that everybody could see. And out of the mist fell a cylindrical gray object, clumping heavily when it landed.

Todd grunted, "There's your fair fight—

ing. We used to call it a 'lead lawyer.' Guaranteed to settle all arguments. Fist it, and you've got a double punch." He grabbed his jaw, shook it. It seemed all right, but was swollen. A lead lawyer would do that every time it didn't kill you. "Open the other fist, Cray," Todd rasped.

The bad man had backed off. He opened his other fist, and threw a lead cylinder down. It thumped on the floor. But he used that hand to catch up a chair. With a single overhand sweep, he sent it hurtling through the air at Todd. It came spinning and Todd threw up an arm, but one leg rapped his temple like a hammer. He reeled back and saw that Cray had snatched up a table. The bully-boy had it in front of him like a shield, and was coming at a crazy, galloping run.

His back against the bar, Dulany knew it would squash him like a spider. He leaped to the side, trying to escape, but it caught his shoulder. Just a corner of it spinning him around, catching his arm. The rest of it hit the bar and it broke in half. That freed him. Groaning with pain, he turned back on Cray.

Cray had half the table and he caught it by one leg, his face blazing and his eyes wild. He crashed it down and it broke again on Todd's shoulder, and Cray chopped and chopped at Todd with the remaining leg, until he sprawled to the floor. He scurried off on his knees, bleeding and bruised all over, fighting to get up.

He staggered to his feet, grabbed a leg up to fend off the ripping blows. Cray had gone crazy, and there was only one thought in him—to kill.

"Die, Law!" he screamed. "Die!" He heaved his arms back for a mighty swing with the table leg, and Todd saw his last chance. He jabbed the leg he held straight in at that red face. A scream came out of it.

Cray staggered back. His face was bloody. He swung once more with the table leg, and it ripped into the one Todd held. Cray let his go and rushed in, arms outstretched, fingers clawing. He caught those enormous arms around Dulany's head. The rush drove them back, back into the batwings. Dulany stumbled over the doorsill. He slipped and went down, but as he went he kicked out with one leg. He went down on his back with a crash that

completely smashed the lights out of him. But his leg was stiff, and Cray rode it. Rode it screaming off into the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER

3

Run, Law-Dog, Run!

When he awoke, Todd Dulany imagined he was in his bed at the boarding house. There was that same lump in the straw mattress, under his left hip. He even seemed to hear Old Lady Austen, though her voice didn't have the usual rusty whine to it. That made him doubt where he was. But, no, there was that little pillow of sagehen feathers, all scratchy at the back of his neck.

There was another voice that made it all crazy. Lily Franks, the female member of the gang. Her voice was purring, soft.

"But I'll see when he wakes up, Mrs. Austen," she was saying, in an innocent, child-like kind of voice. "If he wants me to," she went on, "and you know I am a qualified nurse—"

Todd groaned aloud. That was too much. It he were really in his own room at Mrs. Austen's, and Lily was putting out a line like that. . . . He came into focus a little then, as Old Lady Austen's voice reverted to its customary rasp.

"Wall, I'm that busy, I can't be messing with no brawlin' low-lifes. A body's got all she can manage around here 'thout playin' nursemaid. I got work to do, so if he'll have you do it, all right. But get your money in advance; I don't trust a one of the lot!" And a door slammed closed.

There was no mistaking her voice. Todd knew now it was not just a dream. Lily Franks was in his room at the boarding house. And he was on fire all over, with his arms so sore he couldn't move them. Suddenly something warm and soft was spread over his face—a poultice of some kind.

He put his hand to his face and caught a hand. A soft, warm hand. He caught it hard, for his nerves still strung up tight as guitar strings. There was a little cry, and she tried to pull her hand away.

"No you don't," he growled, spitting at the stuff over his mouth. Cotton soaked in a bitter mess, it tasted like. He tore the rest of it off his face and opened his eyes. They didn't open well, and seemed to

be shadowed by bruises so he had to squint to see.

Her face was above him. A young, rounded face, clean and innocent, clouded by soft brown hair. Her eyes matched it, soft eyes—the eyes of a young professional nurse, people would say. And it would be the wrongest judgment ever made.

"You're here to watch me, eh," he said. He pushed up on his elbows. "Smooth. You're smooth operators, all six of you. Five, I mean." His lips seemed to get in the way of his talking, and the words bruited out.

She wrenched her hand away from him. "Shut up," she snapped, and hard black points appeared in the centers of her eyes. "You know who I am and what I'm doing here, but shut up. You're in no position to fight out of it." She slapped the poultice back on his face, and pushed him flat.

He lay there, exhausted now, the poultice warm and comforting on his torn, bruised face. His back ached from the smashes of Cray's table leg, and every bone seemed to be bruised.

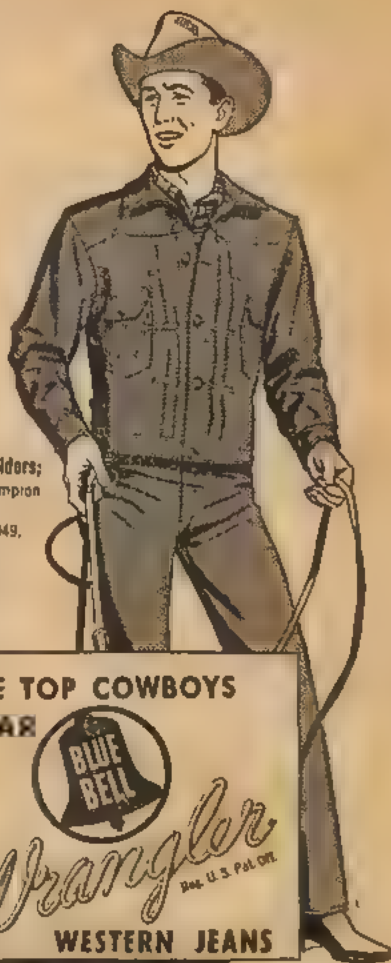
That Cray, he'd never fought a man like that. Oh, they lined up so pretty, this gang. A bully-boy like Cray to brute their opposition down. A slick man with a hide-out gun like the little gambler, to take him unawares—only their man wasn't slick enough. The girl—so honest and respectable looking, to move in when a respectable woman was needed. The others he couldn't peg so neatly, except for the brains. Somebody was the brains, the one guiding the plan to maneuver Clayton into their pockets.

"The brains," he said through the poultice. "Are you the brains of this bunch, Lily?"

She laughed, a quick, bitter sort of laugh. "Brains? Mister Law, I can fake a registered nurse and deal a fast deck of cards, and when a drunk is carrying too much money for his own safety, I can lure him some place where Cray and a club can go into action. But brains—"

He said nothing, listening to the bitter twang in her voice.

"I'm not dumb; it's not that," she said quietly. "It's that to brain this gang you got to have a fat cold diamond where your heart should be. Or a bag of gold, if that sounds better to you. Me, I'm just a girl



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that has got to get along in the world."

HE PAWED the poultice off his face and looked at her. She was staring blankly at the plaster wall above him, as though she saw a lot of things that weren't nice. They all showed in shades of expression passing over her face, but you couldn't tell what they were from that. Her eyes dropped to his, and he saw she was frightened. Her eyes were not calm and innocent now, nor angry. They were shot with fear. She licked her lips nervously.

"Do you know why I'm here, Dulany?" she said hoarsely.

"To poison me?"

She bit her lip. "He didn't think of that, I guess. No, I'm to keep people away from you, and tell you what'll happen if you don't leave Clayton."

He said, "They seem pretty much afraid of me. First that gambler with the hat gun took after me, then Cray the bully-boy, now you."

She nodded. "The plan is wider than that, but you stood in the way of things going right. You've survived twice now when you were supposed to die. Instead, two men have died."

"Two men! Cray—?"

"When you kicked him off the porch last night, he landed on his head. Neck broken. Now it's more than just getting rid of you, more than just you blocking things. They're crazy for your blood. Dead or alive, you've got to go."

He had a momentary feeling of satisfaction. They wanted Todd Dulany's big fists out of the way, so they'd arranged the show at Gila Crick. But it was past that. They were crazy to kill him, now.

"And if I leave, you'll clean up here in Clayton?"

She looked strangely at him. She opened her mouth to speak and it stayed open. For a moment she stared. Finally she said, "Listen, a woman in my position—well, I've got to do what they say, understand? George Franks—the big one—is my brother. He's a killer and worse, and I have to do what he says. I'd like to run away—Lord, how I'd like to! But how could I live, what could I do?"

He nodded slowly. This was no place for a woman alone.

She stood up quickly, nervously. "You know what I'm getting at?"

He frowned. "You can't leave the gang—"

"I can." She smiled suddenly and there was an intense glitter in her eyes. "I can! I'll leave with you, Dulany!"

He was too surprised to speak, just stared at her. Her fists were clenched and her smile was hard and desperate.

"Heaven knows I don't love you, the way your face is battered, Dulany. But I saw you back at the stage station in Haytown. You're good enough. So I'm going with you, Dulany."

"No!" he blurted. "If I go—if I run out, it'll be alone."

She came close and leaned over him. Her eyes had the black needle points in them now. Her breath came in quick gasps.

"If you go alone, Dulany, you'll go dead!"

He had no answer to that. . . .

Later that day Old Lady Austen jerked the door open. Her voice rasped in: "That old fool Peterson finally got back from Puma way, busted a wagon wheel and had to ride a hoss on to Puma to the blacksmith to get it fixed. That's the kind of old fool he is—can't wire a piece of grease-wood in for a new spoke. Says he's comin' in to talk to Dulany if he can talk again. Huh! That old goat knows about as much about his business as this female knows about nursin'!"

She tromped off down the stairs.

Lily smiled wryly. But almost immediately her face was again hard and determined. "Well?" she said.

"I haven't decided. I'm too beat to think." Todd touched a hand gingerly to his swollen face. He was weak, too, from loss of blood. He had eaten at noon, but still he was too weak, too bruised to think right.

"All you've got is a choice. A coffin—or me and the trail south. Why stay here and get killed? For a hundred dollars a month?"

That made it simple. For a man beaten as badly as Todd was, the argument faded. The easy way was the only way. As he thought of it, the blood pulsed into his head. To go off with a lovely young woman like Lily—or to fill a wooden box!

"Meet me at dark at the south end of

town," he said. "Get a horse for yourself."

She smiled, and for the first time it was an easy, pleasant smile.

When Dad Peterson came in, Todd was sitting on the edge of his bed, rolling a smoke with fingers that seemed too bruised to handle the delicate job. He cursed and handed the tobacco and papers to Lily. "Twist me one," he said.

Peterson sat down beside him. "I heard about the fight, Todd. Damn, he beat you up!" He looked at Todd, and glanced at Lily. He scowled. She looked down away from the oldster's piercing eyes, blushing.

"What she doin' here?" Peterson growled.

Todd tried to grin. "My nurse."

Peterson turned around and spat tobacco juice out the open window. "Hell," he muttered, scowling at the girl, as though the word were for her benefit. "I got a waggin' tongue, Todd, like you said. I'm itchin' to tell about Gila Crick." He scowled at the girl again, to show why he was so anxious to tell.

"Hold it until dark," Todd said.

"Till dark?"

"Yeah. I'm crawfishin'. Backin' out." He looked flatly at Peterson. He was admitting defeat, and he put it into the look he gave Peterson. He took the rolled cigarette from Lily and stuck it in his mouth.

Peterson was too shocked to speak. He mumbled something about 'Fence rail and tar and feathers' and Lily heard it and clutched her throat.

"I'm ruined anyway," Todd growled. "I'm pulling out, Dad."

Peterson nodded slowly. With a gesture of disgust, he spat his chaw out the window and walked off and down the stairs.

AN HOUR before dark Todd left the boarding house and walked down toward his office. A couple of men stopped him on the way, storekeepers he'd known ever since he'd come to Clayton.

"Boy, you sure handled him!" one of them laughed, slapping him on the back, and striking a place that was all one bruise. "But what that big ox did to your face, Todd! Well, you sure handled him."

"Oh, sure," he said, hurrying on away from them.

There were shouts all along the street,

men pounding him on the back. Everybody was happy he'd won the fight. They were proud they'd picked such a fighting man for their city marshal. They suggested favorite liniments for his bruised body, and salves for his face. They meant well, but the chatter got on his nerves. He didn't want this. He wanted to head off away from Clayton, and leave it all behind.

He passed Samcard Breadon's. He wondered if Samcard would become friendly with the gang after he had gone. Possibly. He shook his head, too bruised and tired to care. He didn't want to see Samcard. Or anybody.

He went to his office and began collecting his few personal belongings. He straightened his files and records, and then sat down in the swivel chair and stared numbly out at the street. He wondered if in killing the little gambler and Cray he had accomplished anything. Well, taking Lily along would subtract three from the gang of six. But it seemed like a six-armed octopus—he hadn't touched the head. And the head would get new arms.

He decided he didn't even care about that.

And then he saw them coming across the street. The three of them, each with a hand in his right coat pocket. As alike as three peas, even though one was bigger than the others. All wore the same respectable black suits, the same flat, expressionless look on their faces.

They climbed the steps of the office and stood for a moment on the porch, staring in the window at him. They moved through the doorway slowly, in single file. They stood against the wall, each still with his hand in a right coat pocket.

"You're leaving town tonight, Marshal?" It was George Franks talking, the big one—Lily's brother. His face was blank, heavy.

Todd didn't get up. He swiveled around in his chair. "Yes," he said.

Franks smiled. As though they felt the smile, the two flanking him smiled, too. It was a movement of lips that changed nothing in their cold, brutal expressions.

"Lily isn't going," Franks whispered hoarsely.

"Lily?" Todd felt his mouth drop open. Lily had told them. Why? He was almost afraid to ask.

"Lily told us," Franks said, his smile widening a little, and his eyes going colder than before. He stepped forward until he towered above Todd. "Lily was acting strange when she got back from the boarding house. So we asked her."

Todd tried to get up. Lily's brother stepped on his toes. The others moved around to flank him, hide him from the window while they were crowding him back into the chair.

"Lily gets hurt easy," Franks whispered. "She told us."

For a moment Todd was stunned by it. "Your sister!" he breathed. "You beat her?"

"Lily hurts easy," Franks said, still smiling.

Todd saw red. All the fire came back to him then, and he pitched himself forward into Frank's belly. He drove a fist up, but one of them caught his other arm and threw him off balance, and the fist missed. They crowded him back to the wall. Their right hands came out of their pockets then. In each was not a gun, as Todd had thought. Each clutched a short billy club.

Todd got his foot against the wall and pitched himself at Franks. He opened his mouth to shout out at the street, but a club smashed the side of his head. It knocked the shout out of him, but he could still fight. He felt his fist hit flesh, and it felt good. And then another billy club gashed across his head.

He let out a bellow of rage and hooked his right fist into Franks' stomach. The big man gave way, and Todd charged across the room. He headed for the door, so he could yell out into the street. Hands clutched his foot and he slammed down, his whole body hitting the floor, hard.

A man jumped on his back and a billy club cracked him between neck and shoulder. Jolts of agonizing pain shot through him. He writhed, and the next blow glanced off his head.

Blind with pain, Todd rolled over. His hand caught a jaw and the flabby skin around it. He clawed in with all the strength that was in that hand. Then he cracked his left into the face.

That was all. A club hit from behind and drove all the light out of his brain and into the floor. He went down spinning, and the bottom came up and met him.

CHAPTER

4

Dulany's Inferno

He didn't know how much later it was when he heard the voices. They seemed distant, yet clear. One was George Franks'.

"Hell, we didn't know what to do with him! I had to call you over. He wouldn't go quiet. Lot of people came runnin' to see what the ruckus was, and we had to move him over here to this cell. We told 'em we thought the noise was out back."

Samcard Breadon swore under his breath. "You've bungled it every time."

Franks said, his voice shrilling, "You knew he was a tough one or you wouldn't have set the whole six of us against him at Gila Crick. Now Haze got his face smashed up. Oh, sure, you had this town laid wide open for us! All we got to do is get rid of the city marshal, eh?"

Breadon snorted. "You've bungled it every time, I still say." He grumbled to him for a minute. "I was better off as it was. I never should have been so greedy, bringin' you in. It was soft, safe, and legal, before."

Franks laughed shrilly. "I've seen your kind! You made big money from cleaning that bank in Montana. We heard about that. You put it in a nice safe business, and you went legal. But you can't stay that way, can you, Breadon? You got to go back at it! Big, fast money!"

"All right, I'm back at it. And you've bungled your part."

"Bungled, hell!" Franks' voice dropped to a snarl. "I'm givin' orders now, Breadon. We're runnin' this show. A big haul tonight. Like I told you, this burg'll burn like a firecracker. We'll get rid of this lawhound in the fire—" Todd felt a kick into his side, as Franks indicated him—"and then we start raidin'. The town will fight fire, and every store cash box will be waitin' for us. The jewelry store next to your place won't have anything left but glass, and that tin safe in the stage station won't take a minute to open. Like I said, you'll give us directions on where every cash box in town is fixed. See?"

"I don't want—"

"Shut up. You're going to be fightin' the fire. We're keepin' you respectable." Franks paused.

Todd caught his breath at that pause. Even as near to blacking out as he was, he knew it was better for the man to go on talking. He heard a scratch of shoe-leather on the cement floor of the cell. Then a brand came down on his head, a white-hot thing that wrapped itself around his head and burned to the very core of his brain.

He didn't blank out. He just became numb. He could feel somebody tying his hands together, then his feet, and pulling them up and tying them to his hands, until he was bent like a bow. It hurt, but only until he fell into the bottom again.

Next thing he knew, they were untying him. It seemed ages later. A voice was saying, "Get the ropes off. They might not burn off and somebody in this hick burg might ask questions."

Waves of unconsciousness seemed to be stripped off him. *I got a hard head*, he whispered to himself. *Or maybe it's broken.*

His head spun and throbbed. He began to hear better. Feet were creaking the boards in his office, and there was a mumble of voices. Then he smelled kerosene. The sharp odor bit into his nostrils.

He opened his eyes. It was dark, pitch-dark. Then he realized that one eye was swollen shut. He wouldn't see anything with that eye anyway. The whole side of his face was stiff with clotted blood.

Suddenly the kerosene smell changed. It became oilier, suffocating. And light began to come to his undamaged left eye.

Dulany groaned. He tried to get up, but he was too beaten, too bruised, and his legs were sacks of mush. Noise now, a crackling of burning wood. Heat reached out at him. Laying flat, he tried to back away from it. Was that his hair burning?

He pushed with his hands, squirmed, got half way to his knees and pushed again. The flames were not so hot. He pushed again, squirming, pushing the cement floor away from him. His feet hit something. The wall. And the flames were growing, crackling wildly, snapping the sun-parched wood of the office into fiery dust.

He lay numb again, pleasantly warmed by the fire. Warmth made him think of Lily—Lily who had lured men to where billy clubs waited. And billy clubs reminded him of her brutal brother and Samcard Breadon.

Samcard, who couldn't stay straight, George Franks, who had never tried to.

And suddenly, crazy anger boiled up inside him. Hate for Franks and Breadon—men who had tried to wreck him or kill him, who had already ruined Lily's life. But no. Lily had been hurt, had been used in their dirty schemes, but inside she had a brightly burning spark of decency. A good man was all she needed.

He forgot the billy clubs that had dented his skull, and the nauseating bands that crushed his brains. Hate for these two men brought back his strength. He stood up, leaned back against the wall to steady himself.

Before him was a roaring, scarlet sheet of flame. The stone wall wouldn't burn, but the heat would kill him in another minute. Calm now, he felt down to his holster. His gun was still there. Perhaps they'd left it to show he'd died naturally, armed. He pulled it out and turned to the cell's only window.

He heard the shouts of a crowd out in the street. Away from him, for the cell faced on the rock walls of the gorge, rising beyond him.

The blaze showed him every crack in the wall. He picked a crack below a window bar. He leveled his gun and fired into it. Mortar dust spat up. He fired again. Rock splinters flew. Angrily, he emptied the gun into that crack. At the last shot, a rock splintered out, showing him the bottom of the bar, imbedded in mortar.

His back seemed to be on fire now, and for a second he lost all control and screamed. He beat the gun against the wall. Then his mind cleared again. Quickly, he reloaded his gun. He emptied it again at the rocks surrounding the bar. The shots were like dynamite smashing at him, crashing around the walls of the cell. But the last shot smashed a rock outside, throwing it clear. The bar hung free.

He dropped his gun and grasped the bar. With a jerk it was out. A sheet of flame smashed at him, driving him against the wall. He heard his own voice crying out. In desperation, he flung himself up the wall, squeezed painfully through the narrow opening.

Suddenly his hands were grasped. They yanked at him. He crashed down to the ground. There were voices, and hands

rolling him over, shouting, "Shirt on fire, roll 'im!"

He rolled. Hands caught his feet and dragged him over rocky ground. Then a rough voice said, "Hook your mouth around the neck of the bottle, Todd." A round glass cylinder went into his mouth and liquid flame seared down his throat. He coughed and it was taken away. He knew the taste. It was Dad's pint.

"Don't he look like hell, Lily! Er, pardon my French."

LILY He opened his eyes. The right eye still gave only a splinter of light. Lily was there, bending over him, and Dad Peterson with the pint bottle in his hand. As he watched, Peterson tilted the bottle into his own mouth, drank lustily.

"They didn't keep a guard on Lily," Peterson said, wiping his mouth. "She skinned out the hotel window on a bed-sheet and hunted me."

Seeing her, the soft warmth in her eyes, and hearing that, Todd knew he'd figured right about Lily. She said nothing, but he could read all he needed in her eyes.

He turned to the fire, just as the roof on his office fell in, and a pillar of flame shot up. The jail window he'd crawled out of was spouting fire. He shuddered.

"Those devils!" Again strength surged through him and he struggled to his feet. They took his arms to steady him. "No, I can get along. Give me your gun, Dad."

He took the oldster's Colt, and now they both followed him as he trotted down behind the row of stores next to the jail. All were catching fire now. At the other end of town he heard an earth-shaking boom. Dynamite. The miners were already trying to contain the fire. But he felt a wind rising, and he knew the town, lying in the narrow gorge, could go up in flame.

He hurried out of the alley into the main street. It was bright as day with a solid row of buildings blazing. The other side of the street was as yet untouched, but was pinked by the flames. The big gold Samcard over Bredon's saloon seemed to dance, as though Samcard were mocking the town, laughing in the face of all the hell he had caused.

Men streamed through the streets like ants, a whorl of confusion, carrying axes

and buckets of water, dragging useless things out of the burning buildings. Todd stood there, raking them with his eyes, and suddenly a furtive movement on the boardwalk caught his eye. A man ducking out of a store, carrying something. The big shoulders, the pale face turned for a second toward him. Franks.

He heard Lily catch her breath, sobbing. He began to run, to race dodging through the crowds of men. They didn't even see that he carried a Colt in his fist, that most of his hair was burned off, his face swollen, sooted, caked with blood. They were too busy running feverishly about, in the way of men when fire threatens to raze an entire town.

Franks saw him coming. He began to run, hugging a box tight to him. A man came out of the fire-fighting crowd and ran toward Franks. It was Samcard, yelling incoherently. But then Todd knew that Samcard wasn't after Franks. He was running to the saloon. The shingle roof was on fire.

Another dynamite charge went off then, down the street, and a two-story building collapsed like a house of cards. The flame roared up to the gap it left, and stopped. Already men were climbing up on the next house with buckets of water and brooms, to beat out the sparks.

Samcard was yelling as he leaped up on the boardwalk and plunged in through the batwings to his saloon. Todd almost laughed. Samcard was seeing his whole evil plan turn back on him, and the fire was about to wipe out his honest efforts of years.

Franks reached the Samcard a second later, glanced around once at Todd, and plunged inside.

Todd had his eyes fixed on the batwings of the saloon. He didn't see a man rushing past him, carrying a shovel. He tripped over the blade and went flat. Scrambling up to his feet, he hurried on toward the saloon.

But another man was ahead of him. A stout miner was running down the boardwalk, carrying a box. A voice bellowed out from the street, a voice heavy with authority:

"Yeah, in there, Clark. We got to clear Samcard's to save the east side of the street."

Todd recognized the voice as that of one of the mine bosses, and sickeningly, he realized what was in the box—dynamite! But it was too late, for Clark had raced in through the batwings already, carrying the box.

Todd screamed a warning, but it was too late. A shot roared in the saloon. The miner Clark came staggering back out of the batwings, bent over, clutching his belly, his face twisted with agony. Blood streamed from his wound.

"They thought it was me coming in!" Todd cried out. He raced up to the boardwalk. Clark was falling from it. Another shot cracked, throwing the miner to the street.

From inside, another shot blasted. It was instantly drowned by a roar that split the hellish night wide open, a blast that lifted the roof of the Samcard, bulged out the walls, and left a vacuum that sucked them back in as though they were thrown by giant hands.

Todd was knocked to the ground by the blast. As he struck, he pictured what had happened inside. When they shot Clark, he dropped the dynamite. Perhaps in the crazy light of the flames, they thought the dynamite was a man. Or maybe they hit it by accident.

It didn't matter. When Todd stood up, too.

THE END

the Samcard was a flattened tangle of broken timbers—a house of cards collapsed by an unseen hand.

* * *

Clayton was divided forever on the truth of what happened that night. As Peterson told the story of Samcard and the gang of six that tried to take over Clayton, it sounded too fantastical. Yet, with a third of the town burned, almost anything seemed possible. His story was borne out by those who caught one of the two thin men looting a store, and shot him on the spot. The other disappeared.

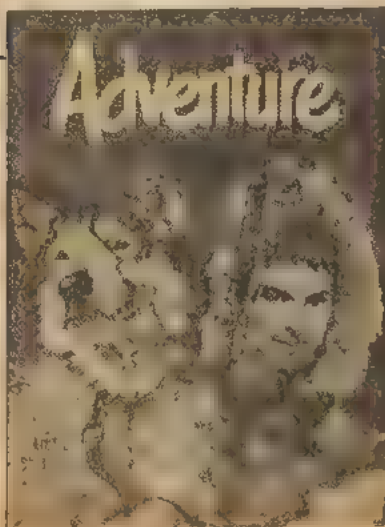
The local doctor was busy that night, patching Todd Dulany and others who were singed in the fire. Samcard Breadon lived long enough for the doctor to say he couldn't live. Franks was dead when they pried half the roof of the Samcard off his body.

But nobody would believe anything bad about Lily. "She looks so plague-on-it-wholesome," Dad Peterson said, "that I reckon she is!"

Todd agreed to that. With a good man, Lily would be all right.

"Only I wouldn't take no chances," Peterson said. "I'd marry her up proper and legal, right off."

And Dulany was through taking chances,



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DEAD MAN'S HOMESTEAD

By R. M. F.
JOSES



The gunman moved his head
in an impatient gesture.

It was more than the cattle-king could understand—a nester who wouldn't be bluffed, wouldn't be shot . . . and wouldn't rest until he brought the fight to his enemy's door.

IT WAS too late now. Only the waiting for the man called Pawnee was left. John Calgary stood outside the split-rail fence and narrowed his eyes against the cascade of light over the drifted snow. While he watered the stock, the sun had dropped to a scarlet crescent above Iron Bluff. In the last light of day the whole of Wooden Valley seemed afire, the earth and sky painted a flaming red.

A sensation sharper than the freezing weather stirred at the base of Calgary's spine and his mild eyes darkened. This was a preview of what Lee Armitage had promised, but there would be real flames when the man acted.

A powerless anger striking through him, Calgary strode through calf-deep snow. He was a big man, rangy of frame, and he moved with an economy of effort. A rough sheepskin coat covered the gray homespun of his shirt, but he was bareheaded and ungloved. His hands spoke of all of him: blunt, sinewy, yet capable of tenderness; rough and work-worn, but still sensitive.

Halfway to the house standing near the timber, he skirted the stone foundation of his first home. *In the spring*, he thought, *I must clear out the rubble.*

He put away from him the part of his mind that rose to question whether spring would come again for John Calgary. As soon as the ground was solid, he would clean up the charred remains of the first building.

There had not been time to do it when he brought Martha and the baby back from the railroad terminal in Norton. In fact there had scarcely been time to put up any kind of shelter before winter struck. At first a blind rage had taken hold of him when he found the home he had built with his own labor burned to the ground, a fire-gutted ruin. Then the rage had given way to a frenzy of determination that drove him from dawn until dusk, and then through half the night, working by lantern light. He had won the race with winter, and although this house was cruder and smaller than the first, it served.

The fire had been something more than coincidence, Calgary knew, but proof was another thing. And in this raw country men like Armitage were a law unto themselves, even against proof.

He stamped the snow from his boots and went into the house. The warmth and fragrance of the kitchen struck him, and he saw his wife bent over the stone fireplace, the play of firelight soft on the curve of her face.

"It seems warmer," he said in his slow, deep voice.

"I thought it was. The baby is better, too."

Neither of them voiced what was upper-

most in their minds. The spectre that clung to the shadows was driven back by these little things, a baby's cold, the breaking of winter. John Calgary drew off the sheepskin coat and moved into the only other room in the house. Light followed him to fall on the small face of his son, asleep in the tiny bed next to theirs.

He listened to the even breathing of the child, touched a finger to a forehead that was cool, then nodded to himself and closed the door.

He said to his wife, "If you wrapped him well—"

"I am not leaving," she said with finality.

He moved to the table, sat with his arms flat, fingers locked together, staring at the scrubbed pine. There was nothing more he could say. When Armitage and his riders left, he had pleaded with her to take the team and wagon into Norton, knowing as he argued that she would refuse.

Surely the man Pawnee had decency enough to leave a woman and child unharmed—or did he? There was something about him that set him apart from other men. Even Armitage seemed to fear him, and treated him with a servility he accorded no one else.

The man was a killer. One look into the pale, cadaverous face, the overly bright, wary eyes, told Calgary that. In spite of the cold earlier that day Pawnee had worn only thin, supple gloves and his coat stopped at his waist, well above the .44 Colts tied low on either leg.

WITHOUT tasting it, he ate the food his wife placed before him, forcing it down his constricted throat. His eyes followed her movements, watched her slender form, the ring of gleaming brown hair at the nape of her neck. He had not been fair to her. What he had seen when he first came into this country was not the same through a woman's eyes. For him, the isolation, the cold and heat, a rough shanty for a home, all these were secondary to the rich land and abundant water. Water which Armitage demanded now.

He rose and averted his glance. "The wind is coming up. Best close the shutters."

A horse's whinny drifted on a breath of wind, and fear was stark in Martha Calgary's eyes. "John!"

Calgary lifted the Sharps carbine from its pegs and moved his tongue over his dry lips. "One of ours," he said, doubting himself at the same time.

Outside the night was filled with quick suggestive movement as the wind lashed the trees. Bitter gusts knifed at John Calgary while he moved from one window to the next, closing the shutters by touch, his eyes on the dark around him. In his hand the barrel of the Sharps was cold and hard.

One shot against twelve. A farmer against a professional killer.

The snow on the south side of the house was still trampled from the mounts of Armitage and his men. A semi-circle of packed snow, amber-stained with droppings, fanned out from where he, Calgary, had faced them. Pawnee had been to one side, he remembered, apart from the rest, his glittering eyes appraising John Calgary, moving over the farmstead and mapping each approach.

Lee Armitage was on his big bay, his flabby face reddened with anger. "Home-
stead, hell! No squatter is going to crowd me off water I've used for ten years."

John Calgary said in his even voice, "There is water enough for all."

The cattleman answered with a stab of spurs in the bay's flanks that sent the horse rearing with a squeal. "You and your truck get off this land by sundown. Or you won't live to use it."

The bay's hooves slashed downward at Calgary's head, and he ducked to his knees. It was either that or have his skull crushed. Then, as he rose, snow caked to him, a hoot of derisive laughter drifted from the riders and Pawnee's lips curled in a thin line. . . .

The last of the shutters closed and latched, he went back in the house. A heady, sour-sweet odor filled the kitchen and he saw his wife slowly stirring a thick liquid in the iron pot over the embers.

"Soap," she said defensively. "We can't go dirty."

In spite of the weight dragging at him, Calgary smiled. As ordinary a thing as making soap meant tomorrow would come and life would be as before. Standing beside her, the Sharps still in his hand, he passed his arm around her waist, and she looked up into his face.

"You should have married another man," Calgary said heavily. "One who

would have been content to stay in Boston."

Her head dropped on his shoulder. "I love it here, John. The country is beautiful. We are making a new life for ourselves." The motion of the ladle in her hand slowed, stopped. "If only . . ." Anger was bright in her eyes. "This man Pawnee. What does he have against us?"

Calgary shook his head, watching the bubbles rise through the mixture of lye and tallow to blister on the surface with a hiss. "Not Pawnee. He is told what to do—a hired gunfighter."

Calgary had seen them on the dusty, rutted street in Norton, lean men with the stamp of recklessness on them. Men whose hands never strayed far from the smooth butts of the Colts they carried.

"Then Armitage."

"He has learned what power can do," Calgary said. "Whether he owns this land or not, he intends to have it. It makes no difference that he does not need it. What he wants, he will take."

Martha Calgary was silent. A gust of wind whipped down the chimney, carrying the hot breath of the bubbling soap into Calgary's face. He listened, his head cocked, an inner sense sending pin-pricks of warning along his spine. There was no sound above the howl of the wind.

"Armitage is a coward," he said. "He hasn't the courage for what he hires Pawnee to do. But he may be bluffing. I intend—"

The crash of the door, sudden and sharp, cut off his words. Wind blew into the room, but even before it had sent the oil lamp guttering, Pawnee was through the door. The man moved with liquid grace, leaping through the opening and ducking to one side, the muzzle of his Colt centered on the man and woman by the fire.

I NSTINCTIVELY, Calgary jerked the Sharps carbine up, then let it fall. It was too late. In the time it would take him to raise the hammer, Pawnee could empty his revolver. Already the man's finger curled around the trigger and his eyes were chips of black onyx under the brim of his flat-crowned Stetson.

"You should have sent your wife away, Calgary."

Pawnee's lips scarcely moved as he

spoke. There was no pity or regret in the man's tone. He spoke as if finding the woman there was unexpected, but of no concern to him.

"Why are you doing this?" Martha Calgary cried. "Are a few acres and a spring worth a man's life?"

"Five hundred dollars are," Pawnee said flatly. "To me."

"You can't stop the people," Calgary said slowly. "No matter what Armitage and his kind do, the people will come in here."

A sudden draft swept the flame high in the lamp chimney, then snuffed it out. Only the glow from the fire lit the room, softening the taut, hewn lines of Calgary's face.

"What happens to us isn't important. There will be others, many more than you can stop, Pawnee."

The gunman moved his head in an impatient gesture. The sound of oiled steel meshing into place came as he thumbed back the hammer. Calgary drew a deep, shaking breath and measured the distance separating them. He had no chance of stopping the man, but anything was better than standing stock still for leaden death.

His wife moved beside him as he started his rush. Her hand swept forward, the ladle in it brimming with scalding soap. Pawnee dodged, swinging the revolver, at the instant the scorching soap hit his bare hand.

Flame jetted from the muzzle and the roar of the .44 filled the room. Splinters shot from the pine floor at Calgary's feet and Pawnee yelled. He dropped his gun, shaking the clinging, burning soap from his fingers. His left hand darted for the gun strapped to that side and swept up in a blur of speed.

John Calgary swung the Sharps in both hands like a double-bitted axe. The walnut stock caught Pawnee on the forearm with splintering force that shook Calgary's shoulders. Bone crushed like rotted wood and Pawnee screamed, his eyes rolled back into his head, mouth gaping wide. The Colt dropped from his lax fingers and he stumbled back against the wall.

Calgary was on the gun before it hit the floor. A kind of madness gripped his face, strained his eyes wide and staring. He thumbed back the hammer and leveled the .44 at Pawnee's head.

His wife pulled his arm down an instant before his finger crooked against the trigger. "No, John! Don't!"

He looked at her dazedly, almost without recognition. "He deserves to die."

"Take him to the marshal in Norton," she pleaded. "Please, John."

Calgary's knuckles were bone-white over the butt of the Colt and his chest heaved. He drew his hand over his eyes and shook his head. Moving like a man drugged, he found the other gun, cocked it and gave it to the woman.

"If he moves, kill him."

As Calgary passed, Pawnee's glance turned on him with malignant hatred, his lips compressed in pain. The moon was high now, crystal bright on the snow, and he traced the gunman's steps around the house once, then leading up into the timber. High on the slope he found the man's black mare tethered to a tree, a bottle of coal oil lashed to the saddle. Calgary led the mare to his barn, slipped a hackamore on his work horse and brought the two animals to the house.

Pawnee swung into his high-pommeled saddle with a stifled groan, hugging his broken arm tight against his side. Ugly red blisters covered his right hand and dotted the side of his face where the scalding soap had showered. Bareback on the work horse, his long legs hanging free on either side, John Calgary turned the animal up the wagon road out of Wooden Valley.

Silently, they moved up the drifted road to the crest, and there Calgary called a halt, sitting motionless, his breath frosting in the clear, sharp air. Here the road forked, one leg angling down to the Bar-A, Lee Armitage's ranch, and the other running into Norton. Under his coat, tucked in his waistband, Pawnee's Colt dug hard against Calgary's ribs.

The black mare pawed impatiently and saddle leather creaked. Calgary's thoughts broke off sharply. He looked up at the gunman and saw him slack in his saddle, moaning faintly. John Calgary swung his horse down the left fork, knowing this was what he had intended all the time. Taking Pawnee to the marshal in Norton would accomplish nothing. The pattern had gone beyond the pitiful semblance of law that existed in this country. Armitage recognized only one authority... that of guns.

An hour later he passed the cattle chute at the Bar-A, then the horse corral. Even before he saw the lights of the buildings, the ranch dogs met him.

Calgary stripped the mittens from his hands and unbuttoned the sheepskin, pulling it aside to expose the Colt. The chorus of barks of the dogs brought men from the bunkhouse to stare at the strange procession appearing out of the night, and the ranchhouse door swung open. Lee Armitage stood in the yellow rectangle.

John Calgary slid from the chestnut and led Pawnee's mare into the pool of light below the ranchhouse steps.

"Here is your man."

ARMITAGE'S pale eyes flamed and a murmur ran through the ring of men at the bunkhouse. Pawnee teetered to one side, groaned and slumped from his saddle to sprawl flat on his back on the trampled earth. No one moved forward.

"His arm is broken. A doctor should set it," Calgary said.

Lee Armitage jerked his head to the hands outside the bunkhouse. "Drag him away," he snapped.

Two punchers lifted the unconscious man. Pawnee's head lolled back and he mumbled. Armitage swung to John Calgary.

"What are you waiting for? My thanks?"

Calgary stood motionless.

"No," he said quietly. "The odds are in your favor, Armitage. I am waiting for you to take advantage of them."

Lee Armitage's lips narrowed and his fingers hooked at his gun. Then he stopped, threw his head back and laughed. "Hear that, boys? We got a gunslick here, telling me to make my play."

The circle of riders was silent. Lee Armitage half-turned as if to step back into the house. Over his shoulder, his eyes fixed on Calgary, he tossed, "Be thankful you're still alive to play the fool."

The movement threw Calgary off guard. His hand, ready to jerk the gun from his waistband, relaxed and fell to his side. Armitage whirled back then, his Colt swinging up, spurting orange flame at Calgary.

The tearing impact of the bullet numbed his shoulder, spinning him into the work

horse. The chestnut plunged heavily, wall-eyed, and bolted. The cattleman's gun roared again and the bullet hissed past John Calgary's head. He staggered, caught himself and stood spread-legged. With measured deliberateness he pulled the heavy revolver free, cocked it and leveled it at the silhouetted target of Armitage in the door.

The man swung his Colt for another shot, faltered, then dropped it. "Don't shoot! I quit!"

His empty hands were raised, palms outstretched to Calgary. His jaw quivered and fear bled his face white. John Calgary hesitated for the second time that night. Under the code of this country, Armitage was fair game, just as Pawnee had been, but Calgary was no killer.

He lowered the .44 and Armitage ran for the house, slamming the door behind him. A warm stream spread down John Calgary's shoulder and dizziness swept over him. He closed his eyes and felt himself plunging forward; then an arm steadied him, led him toward the bunkhouse.

"The quitter winged you, fellah," a voice drawled. "We better have a look-see."

He was inside then, and heat melted the cold from him. Calloused fingers pulled the clothing from his shoulder.

"Jest a nick," said a rider.

Moving stiffly with the makeshift bandage on his arm, Calgary shouldered into his coat and looked at the men circling him. There was no enmity in the rough, weathered faces, rather a new respect for John Calgary, the dirt farmer from Wooden Valley. Silent, they followed him out to where a man stood with his horse.

"Calgary," the gray-haired puncher said. "You got that homestead of yours now. Ain't nobody going to step over your line without an invite." He looked at the ranchhouse and spat on the ground. "After tonight I'm takin' my leave of this spread, but me and the boys will be around to see nobody bothers you."

A murmur of assent ran through the riders, and warmth flooded in John Calgary, rising to a choking lump in his throat. He searched for words to thank them.

Then he realized no words were needed. He had earned his right to Wooden Valley, won it beyond contest. John Calgary turned up the road for home, sitting very straight on the back of the plodding chestnut.

FUGITIVE FORT



Leaning to one side, the
redskin raised his warclub.

*Sergeant-Major Dave Cole welcomed
the blazing inferno of an Indian attack
—for it meant that his kid brother
might not hang!*

By **BEN T. YOUNG**

HEARING the log gates of the sally-port creak open, Sergeant-Major Dave Cole hurriedly initialled the monthly return dated April, 1860, and returned it to Hawks, the clerk. "Must be the supply train," Dave said, stepping to the window.

In the dead light of mid-afternoon, Fort Defiance, New Mexico Territory, lay almost silent. It was motionless, too, save for the blue-clad sentry bucking the gale as he walked his post before the guard-house,

and the wind-devils swirling about the cactus-covered slopes of the encircling hills.

Forlorn, this outpost in the Navajo country. The officers and men of the below-strength 1st Battalion 3rd Infantry that formed the garrison, hated it and longed to leave—that is, all of them save Dave Cole. Now that he had young brother Joe safely under his wing again, Dave was content to stay till he'd served out his hitch and could take Joe home to face the music as a Cole should.

Absently Dave watched the dragoon escort clatter past, then the first of the heavily-loaded Pittsburgh wagons headed for the quartermaster's corral. Of a sudden he felt a lash of fear tear through his guts. Hunched on the driver's seat, peering from beneath the dirty canvas cover, was Sam Smead. Sam was a brother of the man Joe had killed, eight years before, in Illinois.

Dave started for the rear door leading to the wood-yard. Joe, a civilian wagoner on the payroll as Tom Parker, was splitting pifion chunks there. Hearing the train, he'd drop his axe and go to help unload. Any moment, now, he'd face Smead and be recognized despite his beard. Then hell would be out for recess.

"Sergeant!"

Dave stopped as though struck by a thrown tomahawk, and snapped to attention facing the open doorway of the post commander's office. "Yes, sir?"

Red-bearded Major Faulkner, pawing the papers on his table, did not answer.

Jumpy as a cat on ice, Dave felt cold sweat beading his forehead. There was shouting in the corral. In his mind's eye he could see Joe clambering over the high wall to flee unarmed into the Indian-infested hills. Or worse still, grappling with Smead for possession of the carbine that every civilian teamster kept handy on the footboard of his wagon.

"Never mind," Faulkner said then, holding up an envelope. "I've found it."

When Dave reached the corral and hurried through the confusion of parking wagons and straining teams, Smead was unharnessing his six horses. Joe was nowhere in sight. "Where's Parker?" Dave demanded of a soldier carrying a sack of beans into the storehouse.

"Hospital," the soldier said, staggering under the load. "Cut his foot with an axe just before the train came in."

Hurrying across the parade, Dave stopped a moment to compose himself, then entered the surgery. "I hear the mule-skinner, Parker, cut his foot," he said to Kelcy, the steward.

Kelcy stowed away some bandage material and looked at Dave. His face was inscrutable as a flat rock. He said nothing.

"I knew him back in the States," Dave

explained, trying to give nothing away. "Oh," Kelcy grunted.

"Can I see him?"

Kelcy nodded toward the ward.

Luckily, Joe was the sole occupant. The plank door of the surgery was, however, far from sound-proof. Sitting on the edge of the cot adjoining Joe's, Dave leaned forward and spoke softly. "Sam Smead's here," he said.

"I know." Joe chuckled. "That's how come this mishap. Hearing the train comin' down the hill, I shinnied up on the stable roof to watch. Spotted the fox-faced buzzard as his wagon rocked up out of the arroyo. Like to fell off the roof from surprise, but I thought fast and—" His voice trailed off into a twisted grin.

Dave glanced at Joe's bandaged foot.

"Nary a thing wrong with it," Joe explained. "The surgeon is sick in his quarters. Kelcy's a *bueno amigo*. Asks nothing, tells nothing. He'll keep me here till the train's gone again, come Wednesday. Before it's back, next month, I'll have to light a shuck. Smead seen you yet?"

"No, but I can't dodge him for three days." He paused as a bugle shrilled. "There goes Retreat."

Dave rose, stood looking down at Joe. One wouldn't have suspected they were brothers. Dave was tall and rangy, with black hair and a dark face which made his eyes seem a lighter gray than they were; a sharp contrast to Joe's stocky build and rawhide-colored hair. "Keep your head down and your trap shut," Dave said, and went out.

The boom of the evening gun had rolled over the hills after the setting sun, and the flag was gone from its staff when Dave re-entered headquarters. Mr. Gould, the adjutant, was just leaving.

"Sergeant," Gould said, taking his pistol-belt from one of the pegs beside the door, "we at last have the additional wagoner we've been pestering headquarters for. A teamster named Smead stays here with his outfit."

DAVE was too upset to want any supper, but lest his absence cause comment, he went to his mess and nibbled at some food. The usual pleasant odors of coffee and hot meat made him sick, and he hurried to his quarters, a small room behind the

office. After kindling a blaze in the corner fireplace, he slumped onto the bunk and sat staring at the flames. That Sam Smead should blunder into this remote place so far from Illinois was startling, like waking to find a rattler in your blankets. "Damn him!" Dave muttered. "Damn them all!"

Since Dave could remember, the shiftless, thieving Smeads—Rufe and Sam, Ned and Chet, and the old man who'd sired the litter on their weed-grown corn-patch down the creek—had been a plague to the hard-working Cole boys, whose father had died in Mexico at the head of his company of Illinois volunteers, and whose mother—sickened by the shock—had raised her two sons to manhood and then also died. "Always watch over Joe," she had told Dave, quoting a verse from the Old Testament, something about a man being his brother's keeper. "Joe's so hot-headed and impulsive." And those traits—plus the Smeads' malicious deviltry—had shortly made Joe a fugitive from the law, and caused Dave's abandonment of the farm to do his mother's last bidding.

Shep, the Coles' dog, had been found shot to death near the Smead cabin. Both furious, Dave and Jim had confronted Rufe Smead, leaning against the tumble-down log barn with a smirk on his face and a Lutes rifle in his hands. Joe had grabbed a hay-fork, and before Dave could stop him—

Out in the darkness the bugler was sounding Tattoo, and Dave listened until the wind had borne the last of the melancholy notes away. Then he fell to seeing his pictures again: Rufe writhing in the dust with blood oozing through his linsey shirt; Sam screaming, "You've kilt him!" as he caught up a mule to ride for the sheriff.

Within the hour Joe had armed himself and fled; and Dave, fearing lest more killing result from a clash with pursuing peace officers, had hurriedly turned over the livestock to the nearest neighbor and followed blindly, knowing only that Joe had a hankering for the West.

For a year, fruitless wandering along the frontier—Council Bluffs, Independence, El Paso. But it was like listening for a whisper in a big wind; and dispirited and penniless, Dave had joined the Army.

Finally, after seven years, Fort De-

fiance was his station; and while on an errand to department headquarters in Albuquerque, he had found Joe lounging on the Plaza. A few words with the quartermaster sergeant who hired civilian labor and Joe, alias Tom Parker, was taken on as a wagoner for Fort Defiance.

Dave replenished the fire and took to pacing the earthen floor. He'd planned, when his hitch was up come June, to turn in his blankets and take Joe back, then hire a good lawyer and see what was what. Now, if Smead saw Joe, that plan was knocked hell-west-and-crooked. Smead would tell everybody. The Coles would be disgraced, and Joe would be returned to Illinois in handcuffs.

Joe must get away quickly. But how? There were no horses nor wagons for sale at Fort Defiance, and Dave would not consider the theft of Government property. Anyway, it would be suicidal for a man to strike out alone, with the Navajos increasingly restless.

Suddenly, he had it. Joe was a civilian and free to leave. He could quit here, blaming his injury, and go with the train when it left Wednesday. At Albuquerque he could head for Mexico, and wait for Dave. Dave looked at his watch. Too late to see Joe now, but—

Tapping on the window brought Dave's head up. He had made no light in the room, but the leaping flames in the fireplace cast a glow on a stubbled face beyond the glass.

Sam Smead.

Dave felt his hackles rise. *Steady*, he warned himself, and slid back the sash. "Go to the door, Smead. I'll let you in."

If Sam was confounded at Dave's casualness, it was not apparent when he entered. "Howdy," he smirked, then emptied a stream of tobacco juice into the fire. "S'prised to see me?"

Dave stood with an elbow on the narrow mantel-shelf, eyeing his visitor. Sam was the same herring-gutted, shifty-eyed coot, his slack face more fallow than ever in the flickering light. He smelled like a wet dog. "Surprised?" Dave countered, sparring for time to gather his wits. "Not 'specially. Men get around these days. Been West long?"

Sam sat down, grinning maliciously. "Six weeks."

SILENCE, then, save for the short rapid puffs of Dave's pipe, and Sam's heavy breathing. "Ever hear from the folks around home?" Sam asked presently.

"No."

Sam seemed to gain confidence then. "I been lucky," he chuckled. "Got this Army job first off. Then I heard there was a Dave Cole at Defiance and, thinks I, where Dave is so's Joe; and here I be."

"You won't find Joe here."

Inching forward on the cord-bottomed chair, Sam tensed himself. "The hell you preach. I have, a-ready. Went to the hospital for some—"

Dave grabbed the slack across the chest of the checkered woolen shirt and jerked Sam up.

Sam bared his yellow teeth. "I wouldn't, Sergeant," he drawled. "Else you'll have them chevrons snatched off'n your sleeves. Think what that red-headed major'd say if'n he knowed you was hidin' a killer."

Dave flung Sam back onto the chair. "And you'll tell him."

"D'pends."

"On what?"

"How you'n me get along. What's it worth to you to hang onto them stripes, an' keep Joe out'n the calaboose?"

Dave shook his head. "Blackmail's a dirty business, Smead. Besides, what money I have is deposited with the quartermaster at Albuquerque."

"You'll have more tomorrow. The paymaster come with the train. Meantime, fix it with the sutler so's I can git me some chewin' an' whiskey on jawbone."

"The sutler can't do business on jawbone. Orders."

"Well, then borrry me a little change from some officer."

Again Dave shook his head. "Can't do that. Anyhow, all the officers are meeting with the major in his quarters. They'll be there till late."

"So?" Sam's foxy eyes narrowed as he rose. "Might be a right smart chanct fer me to spill the beans before the whole shebang."

Glaring, they stood for a moment; then Sam's eyes dropped. "Hell with you!" he snapped, and slammed out. . . .

Dave heard him hesitate as though expecting to be recalled, then go on. Snuffing out the candle, Dave opened the door and

peered across the parade. The post was dark, but as Dave's eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he could make out a patch of black moving toward the major's window. It stopped, then disappeared in the deep shadow along the front of the building.

Dave knew now that Sam wasn't bluffing. For ten minutes he sat with face buried in his hands. Suddenly he raised his head, listening; and a shiver ran down his spine. Firm measured footfalls were approaching the door. Bayonet scabbards, swinging with the strides of their wearers, rattled softly. Smead had told. A detail was coming to arrest him.

He waited for the commands that would halt it. None came. Then he realized it was only a guard corporal posting his relief.

Dave snatched his hat and coat. Maybe Smead was bluffing.

The major's window was still aglow. Dave hurried toward it, stopping only when he could peer inside. The coal-oil lamp didn't make much of a light, but he could see that Faulkner was listening gravely to someone. Other officers were seated about, intent upon the words of someone invisible to Dave.

Again his nerves went taut as bow-strings. *Smead's still sounding off*, he thought. He craned his neck, got a look at the speaker who was leaning against the wall in the corner, thumbs hooked in his belt. It was Long John Pope, C Company's captain. "Thank the Lord!" Dave breathed, turning away. "By tomorrow I've got to think of some way out of this."

Officers' Row was just a line of connected adobe cubicles, each with its own entrance and window. As Dave returned along its length, his steps muffled in the sand, he heard a scraping sound. He stopped. It came again, a rasping, like a sash being inched open. Instantly alert, his eyes bored into the blackness along the wall. Someone was straddling a window sill. Striding forward, Dave jerked the figure into the clear.

With a flick like that of a snake's tail, the fellow twisted free, started to run. Whirling, then, he ducked in under Dave's outstretched arm, and Dave felt the blind stab of a knife tear through the skirt of his coat.

Dave caught the sinewy wrist of the knife-hand, but it threw him off balance and the fellow dumped him backward. The fall drove most of the breath from his lungs, but despite the desperate yank the man made to pull free, Dave held the wrist. A quick twist brought the fellow to one knee, his free hand groping for Dave's face.

As a gouging thumb found one of his eyes, Dave swung in a left that connected with a smack, knocking the knife-fighter sidewise. Still holding the wrist, Dave rolled atop him. "You—thievin'—coyote," he panted.

At once the struggling ceased. "Cole! Lucky it's you. Lemme up."

Dave took the knife. "Like hell, Smead. I could slit your gullet right now."

"Not so loud. If jest us two know this, no harm's done. Lemme go an' I won't pester you no more. I'll forgit 'bout Joe, too."

Dave's mind raced. What to do? He could finish the whelp and, with the open window and the knife as mute evidence, there'd be few questions asked. But he couldn't kill in cold blood. On the other hand, if Smead were turned in, he would talk before going to jail for burglary, and Joe's goose would be cooked. If freed, Smead might—out of gratitude, or to save his own hide—keep his mouth shut long enough for Joe to pull foot. No, that would be a dirty business, too.

Sighing, Dave rose, but kept his hold on Smead. "Corporal of the Guard!" he called.

DESPITE loud demands for an immediate audience with the post commander, Sam was locked in the prison-room, out of action till after Reveille. Then, of course,

he'd be allowed to tell his story. And he would tell it, tell it all.

It was hours before Dave fell into a troubled sleep. Well-nigh at once he came awake again. Bugles were stuttering frantically. Men were running, shouting; a horse was screaming. There were musket shots, sharp, brisk, like cracks of a great whip.

He quit his bed like a buck deer jumped by wolves. Groping for his clothes, he flicked a glance through the window, saw red pencils of flame biting into the darkness on the hillside across the arroyo. He rushed from the doorway and collided with Hawks.

"Cole," the clerk panted. "The major—wants you—"

There was a sinister thud. A bullet had found a resting place. Hawks gulped and fell forward. "Guard-house," he gasped.

As Dave sped across the parade, he saw that the yowling Indians were attacking on all sides. The rattle of musketry was gaining in volume, like the popping of brush in a wind-driven fire. Deploying as it ran, B Company passed him, the non-coms hoarsely cursing the sleep-fuddled men into position.

He overtook Gould, the adjutant, holding his Chicopee saber clear of his long legs. Together they reached the guard-house.

Major Faulkner stood in the open doorway, solid and sturdy as an oak stump. He was fingering a bullet-nicked ear and damning the man who'd built Fort Defiance in a hollow, double-damning traders who sold firearms to Indians.

"Started at the rear gate," he told them, shouting to be heard above the din. The guard was down there with Upton, Officer

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of the Day; and Upton's first sergeant had taken the company down to reinforce them and cover the north. Simmons' men were firing from the roofs along the south wall, and holding their own well enough. Pope's outfit, ordered to the east wall, had gone boiling over, dammit all, and was facing the hill beyond the arroyo. Young Mr. Treadway, the shavetail just joined, had taken a detail and was fussing with the mountain howitzer by the flagstaff, trying to get it into action.

"Hawks was hit, sir."

"Take that man off Number One, then. I want a messenger."

Dave called to the sentry standing there uncertainly, not knowing just what to do. The sentry turned, crouched, sat down heavily. "He's hit too, sir."

Just then a ball crashed through the barred window of the adjoining room, and a yell rose from the occupants. "Release those men, Gould. Can't have them trapped. Arm them." Faulkner pointed to the racked muskets kept there for just such an emergency.

Bounding in, a bugler stood gasping for breath. "Beggin' pardon sir—they're pullin' out on the west, an' Cap'n Upton wants to know should he advance?"

Stepping out, Faulkner and Dave went to the end of the building. On the west and south the fire had slackened, but there was a burst of added fury on the east. "Pope's catchin' it, now," Faulkner said. "Bugler, tell Upton to stand fast; Simmons, too. May be just a trick. Cole, see how Pope's making out. If he needs help, let me know. If they fall back, he may follow as far as the hilltop. Here, take these prisoners. What is it, Gould?"

"One of the prisoners, sir, is a civilian teamster. Says he won't fight."

Smead stepped forward. "Dam' right I won't!"

Roaring, then, the howitzer drowned what Faulkner had to say, which was perhaps just as well. Moving out with his detachment, Dave saw that Smead was with it. *This will at least keep him still for a few hours, maybe for good'n all*, Dave thought. *But if I'm killed and he's not, what will happen to Joe?*

The eastern sky was turning a sword-blade blue. Against it, the hill facing the main gate was a scallop of blackness

spotted with intermittent red holes. Gunfire was stuttering like corn on a hot stove, punctuated now and then by a skull-shattering detonation of the howitzer.

From behind rocks and hummocks along the arroyo, Pope's men were firing up the opposite slope. "Scatter in there!" Dave ordered his charges, indicating gaps in the ragged line, then hurried in search of Pope.

Dave stumbled over the legs of a prone man and stopped. "Get down, fool!" the fellow called.

Seeing the buckskin shirt, the white of a bandaged foot, Dave crouched. "Joe!"

Joe grinned. "Don't s'pose I'm goin' to lose my hair 'thout an argument, do you?"

Dave found Long John Pope leaning against a boulder, hands clutching the shaft of an arrow protruding from his stomach. In the growing light his face showed white and hard-set, like a death mask. "Com-mandin' officer's compliments," Dave began, then stopped.

Long John was sliding slowly to the ground. "You take over—Sergeant," he gasped.

The Indians were breaking. Their fire was still heavy, but the flashes—like red eyes winking—were farther up the hill. Without command, the files fixed bayonets and began to advance. Drawing his revolver, Dave stepped through the line and started up the slope.

Slowly the men moved forward, clutching at rocks and bits of brush while they gained a foothold. A musket ball spanged against a stone at Dave's side. It had come from the rear. He whirled in time to see Smead scuttle behind a cactus.

Dave went back, his eyes blazing. He said nothing, but there was no mistaking the gesture he made with his gun. Smead rose and moved on up the hill, probably expecting a bullet in the back.

Gradually the Navajos were pulling out. A few at a time they withdrew from the fight and scurried over the crest of the hill. Smead, well in the lead now, was hurrying blindly, not stopping to fire. Apparently he was as much afraid of the man behind as he was of the Indians before him.

Dave saw him outlined against the sky, saw him go suddenly to his knees. Whether he'd tripped or been hit, Dave couldn't tell. In an instant a mounted warrior appeared, circled his pony rapidly around the fallen

figure. Leaning to one side, he raised his war-club.

I'm a fool to save him, Dave told himself. But his Colt spoke. The Indian slumped forward till he lay along the pony's neck, then slid headforemost to the ground.

Thin high notes of a bugle floated up from the post. It was Cease Firing, then Recall; and through the slowly thinning cloud of acrid-smelling smoke the panting infantrymen, with the usual apathy of old regulars, turned and began slipping and sliding down the hill again.

Dave went on. He found Smead groveling in the sand beside the dead Indian, whimpering with fear. Smead pointed to the leg of his homespun trousers. An arrow had torn its way through the cloth below the knee, just grazing the flesh. Dave got him to his feet, picked up the musket and helped him to the post.

MAJOR FAULKNER was not one to let a mere skirmish upset things for long, especially since he had no mounted force with which to pursue the scattered Indians. Aside from omitting the day's drills and fatigues, he paid no more attention to it. By early afternoon his report to headquarters was in readiness, as were plans to deliver Smead—charged with burglary and no alibis listened to—to the civil authorities at Santa Fe.

Checking the casualty list, Dave cringed when he came to: *Tom Parker—Civilian—Chest Wound—Serious*. Joe had been picked up unconscious. He still was. And the surgeon held out scant hope. So, when an orderly appeared, telling Dave he was wanted at the hospital, his face went tight and he followed like a man going to the gallows.

"That Smead jigger wants to see you," the orderly explained as they were crossing the parade.

Dave scarcely heard him. Entering the crowded ward, rank with the stench of iodoform, blood and death, his eyes sought Joe's cot. It was empty, and Dave felt his tortured stomach go into a spasm.

The dead had been placed in the laundry where an artificer was knocking together pine coffins. Hurrying there, Dave quickly scanned the row of still forms on the floor, each covered with a blanket. Issue shoes and blue trouser legs protruded from all

but one. Those feet wore cowhide boots. "God!" Dave breathed.

Ceasing his clatter, the artificer watched Dave stoop beside this figure and draw down the blanket. The chalk-like face beneath it was that of one of the wagoners, but not Joe Cole.

With an upsurge of hope, Dave returned to the ward and encountered Kelcy. "Yonder," Kelcy said, jerking his head toward the surgery. "Operation."

"Will he live?"

As Kelcy shrugged, someone called him away; and Dave, about at the end of his rope with worry, looked dazedly about for Smead. He wanted no thanks for saving the worthless polecat.

The slightly wounded had left the hospital, but Smead hung about rather than return to confinement.

"Joe cashed in?" he asked as Dave stopped before him.

He seemed so genuinely concerned that Dave was touched. "No, Sam," he said. "There's still a chance."

"Good! I was a-feared I'd lost my holt on you. Now hark: Take back that charge agin' me or I'm a-goin' to headquarters."

"Smead." His eyes hard as pistol balls, Dave sat on his heels. "I wouldn't blame you for wanting Joe punished for the wrong he's done, but you don't give a hoot about that. You'd let him go scot-free for a few dirty dollars, or to save your own yellow hide. But to hell with you. I'm going to the major right now and end this nightmare."

"Better wait. Joe may not live."

"I'm telling the major anyhow, before you get the chance. If Joe does live, I'll get a furlough and take him back myself, but from now on you've got no hold on me."

In the orderly room, Dave hung his hat on the peg with his gun-belt. The major's gun was there, but Gould was out and Faulkner sat alone in his office. Dave rapped on the jamb of the open doorway and stood at attention, waiting. He dreaded this.

It was a moment before Faulkner looked up.

Saluting, then, Dave spoke, his voice hollow like the far-off beat of an Indian drum: "May I speak to the post commander, sir?" he said. "Privately?"

"Sure, Cole. Come in."

From outside came a sudden confusion of sounds: the creak of the sally-port gates, clattering hoofs, shouts. "What now?" Faulkner muttered, stepping to the window.

A detachment of dragoons trotted past, and urgent boots clumped into the outer room. A man appeared, a man in dust-covered civilian clothing who looked tough as whang-leather. His quick eyes sought Faulkner's shoulder ornaments.

"G'day, Major!" he barked. "You're the post commander, I reckon?"

As Faulkner nodded, the man shoved his wide-brimmed hat back from his forehead and hooked thumbs in the belt. "I'm a United States Deputy Marshal. Come all the way from Illinois after a man wanted for a killin' a while back. Trained him to Albuquerque and found he'd been sent on here." He began to fumble inside his skirted coat.

DESPERATELY Dave fought back a faintness that was all but flooring him. How had they found out back at Illinois? And Dave would so much have preferred to tell Faulkner himself.

The marshal took out a folded paper. "Here's my authority," he went on, handing it to Faulkner. "Letter from the United States Attorney at Santa Fe."

Faulkner read the letter and looked at Dave. "One of those civilians," he growled. "Have him brought here under guard. The name is—" Again Faulkner looked at the letter. "Why," he said, his eyes widening with comprehension. "It's Smead, that thief."

Utterly bewildered, Dave moved out to obey the Major's order. *It's a mistake, he told himself. They've got the names mixed. It's Joe they want, for killing Smead.* . . .

Sam, too, was bewildered as the sentry brought him in; so bewildered that he forgot to limp. His eyes flicked about as he backed against the wall beside the door.

Now it's coming, Dave warned himself. "Wait outside," Faulkner told the sentry, then turned to Sam. "This man has a warrant for you."

"The Federal agent you shot happened to die," the marshal explained. "Just recent."

"Federal agent!" Dave blurted.

Neither Faulkner nor the marshal paid him any heed. They were watching Sam.

Sam's face had gone the color of old snow. "So the feller—I really didn't think he was bad hurt," he croaked dazedly. Something seemed to snap within him. He snarled like a cornered bobcat. Behind him, high on the wall, were holstered guns on wooden pegs. Quick as powder one was in his hand. His thumb was fumbling with the heavy hammer, trying to draw it back.

It was all happening in seconds, but they seemed like minutes to Dave. He saw Faulkner whirl and stoop for a stick of firewood; saw the marshal's fist sweep to his holster and the Allen come up in a smooth arc; heard the hammer of Smead's gun click back. Then Dave swung a chair.

As it crashed Smead back against the wall, both guns roared. The .44 ball from Smead's Colt furrowed the floor. The slug from the Allen went home. Smead's knees buckled, let him down. He kicked convulsively, then was still, silenced forever.

The sentry lunged in but the marshal paid no attention. Whistling softly between his teeth, he walked over and touched the body with a speculative foot. "I'm obliged, Sergeant," he said. "Without that clip you fetched him, I might not have had time. Them Smeads is hard to take in. I got his brother same way last month."

Dave was gazing down into the dead face. "What," he asked dully, "was the brother's name?"

The marshal was putting up his gun. "Rufe."

Dave's head jerked up. "Rufe?"

"Yep. He was in the same ruckus. I've heard say a lad, Joe Somebody, near killed him once with a pitchfork, but—"

The marshal rambled on and the major said something, but Dave wasn't listening. So Joe hadn't killed Rufe! Sam had been playing a trick. If Joe could only live now. . . .

Abruptly Kelcy appeared, saluted the major, flicked an impassive glance over the body on the floor, fixed his inscrutable eyes on Dave and shook his head.

"Won't die," Kelcy reported.

Over Dave's worry-wrinkled face broke a slow smile. His back straightened, his shoulders squared.

"Thank you, Kelcy," he said. "Thank you very much."

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Young Shep found that out for sure when he rode shotgun on his old man's stage—and the Burley boys hitched a ride.



Hyde Burley weaved forward off the wheel. . . .

THE stagecoach was high in Cherokee Cut when the sound of distant gunfire drifted in from the Madreño Mountains that towered east of the pass. Shep Landell glanced at his father in the driver's seat, and old Luke nodded as if to confirm the thought that came instantly to them both: the Burley Brothers. Everybody in the region knew that Hyde and Elroy Burley had broken out of jail,

**By ROE
RICHMOND**

robbed a bank, killed several more men, and headed into the Red Hills that rolled up to the Madrelinos.

Shep would have liked to talk about it, but his father was a quiet man anyway, and he hadn't yet accepted the boy as a full-fledged partner on this Colmer City to Harburg run, although Shep had been riding shotgun guard for two whole weeks. So the boy kept his own mouth shut, even though he was bursting with eagerness to discuss the Burleys, and watched the six horses labor up the long steep grade of the pass cut by the Ossawippi River between the Red Hills and the Madrelinos.

They were up in the cool, fragrant shade of the pines now, and Shep inhaled the highland air with pleasure. It still seemed too good to be true, that he was actually riding with his dad, Luke Landell, the best driver on the line. It would be perfect when Dad finally came to regard him as a full-grown man and an equal—if he ever did. Somehow, Shep knew, he had to prove himself. Thus far the runs had been uneventful, plain routine.

Remembering the distant shots, he checked his equipment. A double-barreled shotgun on his knees, a Spencer carbine within reach at his back, and the Colt .44 holstered on his right leg. He was adept from long practice at handling all three weapons. If the opportunity to display his skill in combat had not come, it was no fault of his.

The road flattened out at the summit, and Luke Landell brought the coach creaking to a halt to rest the horses after their climb. Shep swung lightly down from the left side, saluted the four passengers, and walked around the rear end to stare down at the Ossawippi far below the trail. A steady roar came up from the Great Falls ahead, where the river plunged precipitously toward the valley floor. Shep turned at his father's voice.

"Here, son." Luke tossed a large canteen down. Shep caught it and offered it to the occupants of the Concord.

Big John Parmiter took the canteen and poured water into a silver cup for his daughter Polly, back home from the East. Big John owned the Pronged P, biggest ranch in the area, and a good deal of the town of Harburg. The girl was about Slim's age, twenty, proud and beautiful as a

princess, and the boy held both her and Big John in considerable awe.

After drinking, himself, Parmiter passed the canteen to Hines, a small drummer in a checked suit and derby. Shep was glad when Hines had the courtesy to extend it first to Belle Chompenay, the bright-haired dancehall girl whom Parmiter had deliberately ignored. Big John had been annoyed when he found Belle among the passengers, but Luke Landell had quickly silenced his protest. Nobody that lived inspired any awe in Luke.

"If you don't like it, John, you'll have to lay over in Colmer," Luke told the cattleman: "The lady's ridin'."

"Lady?" John Parmiter demanded indignantly. Then he stopped short at the look in Luke's eyes, and Slim had been prouder than ever of his father.

Now the Parmiters ignored Shep, and only Belle Chompenay smiled with her pretty painted lips and brooding blue eyes as he retrieved the water bottle.

Back on top, Luke set the team in motion with a few words and a crack of the long lash. They rolled on across the level expanse of the summit to the clop of hoofs and jingle of harness, creaking wood and leather, the slurred rattle of wheels and grind of axles. Shep listened intently but there was no more shooting. Maybe the Burleys were dead up there, but more likely they had shot their way out again.

Luke spat a stream of tobacco juice and said: "Them Burley boys. It gives you the same feelin' you used to get when the Apaches was up. I hope Saunders'll know enough not to take them prisoners this time. Men like them oughta be shot like mad dogs."

"The Burleys stood you up once, didn't they?"

"I don't need no remindin' of that," Luke said, and the boy knew he was through talking for the time.

SHEP sighed and settled back. They were approaching the southern rim of the summit, the falls thundering on the west, the Three Chiefs dominating the eastern skyline, the valley of the Ossawippi ahead and thousands of feet below.

A single shot rang out in front of them, and Shep's heart jumped when he saw two figures emerge from a jumble of boulders.

"Don't make a move, son," Luke Landell warned as he reined up and pulled on the brake. "It's the Burleys, on foot, wantin' a ride."

"But Dad—" protested the boy, gripping the shotgun.

"Don't move that gun," Luke ordered firmly, sawing the reins and shouting at the horses to whoa up.

It was the Burley brothers all right, unshaven and ragged, carrying carbines and wearing two guns each, their saddles and bags on the ground at their feet. Hyde was big, broad and massive, dark of eye and black of hair and beard. Elroy was long and lean, his eyes strangely light, his head and whiskers a rusty brown. Hyde had an ugly scowl, Elroy a good-natured grin.

"This ain't a stick-up, Luke," Hyde said sourly. "Horses got hurt and we had to shoot 'em. We're ridin' a ways with you on your stage."

"Took a lot of shootin' to kill two horses," Luke Landell said.

Elroy laughed. "They was tough cayuses, Luke."

Hyde Burley inspected the interior of the coach and motioned to his brother. "Inside, Elroy, you're more of a ladies' man. I'll get on top and watch the old man and the kid."

He heaved their saddles up onto the luggage deck and climbed after them. Elroy smiled and stepped up into the coach, sitting down beside Belle Chompenay on the front seat, facing Parmiter and his daughter.

"Howdy, Belle," Elroy said pleasantly. "And Mr. Parmiter himself with another pretty gal. Two beauties is more'n I bargained for."

On the topside Hyde settled down amidst the baggage and said: "All right, old-timer, let her roll. And make some time on this downgrade."

"Sheriff Saunders on your trail?" Luke asked.

Hyde Burley snorted contemptuously. "He ain't worryin' us, old man. We just want to get to some horses at Midway. Crack that whip!"

"Ever get tired of runnin', Hyde?" Luke threw over his shoulder.

"Not after that stinkin' jail," Hyde said. "Shut up and team them horses."

Shep Landell was feeling scared and

ashamed as they pitched down the long winding loops of the pass. The shotgun might as well have been empty, the .44 a childish toy. It was humiliating the way the Burleys hadn't even bothered to disarm him. The traitorous thought that his own father had betrayed him came and passed. Surely Luke knew best how to handle the situation. After all, it wasn't a holdup; the outlaws merely wanted a lift to the station at Midway.

But something told Shep that John Parmiter's presence would give them further ideas. He was the wealthiest man in the Ossawippi country, and the Burleys knew it.

They might hold Polly Parmiter and make Big John ransom her. . . . Shep pictured himself bracing the Burleys and rescuing the girl, but it wasn't entirely convincing. The brothers made him feel very young and awkward. It was like meeting up with legendary giants, come suddenly to life. Since early boyhood Shep had heard of the Burleys and their spectacular exploits.

Shep sneaked a look back at Hyde Burley and shuddered. Hyde looked like a killer, black, sullen and merciless. Cruelty was in the vicious mouth, the solid stubbled jaws, the broken beak of a nose. From below Elroy's gay lilting laugh floated out, and Slim marveled at the difference in the two brothers. Yet it was said that the smiling Elroy was no less deadly than the surly Hyde, and some declared Elroy even worse.

THE afternoon sun was lowering in the west when the stage dropped at last into the valley, outlining the sandstone columns of the Spires in flame, tinting the massive bulk of Blue Butte with many colors in the east. Luke glanced at his watch, and Shep knew from his expression they were on time. An easy run into Hufnail's at Midway for supper and a change of horses. And then there was no telling what the Burleys might try.

Luke Landell was calm and easy, as if there were no unexpected and unwelcome passengers. His strong, grave face was weathered darkly, cut with stern but pleasant lines. Shep wished he could acquire more of his father's qualities, gain some of that patient strength and quiet as-

surance. He was displeased with his own tall thin frame, still a trifle gangling at twenty. He was impatient to fill out man-sized like his father, get some character into his unmarred face.

"Where'd you get the kid here, Luke?" growled Hyde. "Ain't he kinda tender to be totin' them big guns?"

"He can use 'em," Luke said, and the boy was grateful.

Hyde grunted. "He better not get no ideas."

"What happens at Hufnail's?" inquired Luke Landell.

"Why, nothin' much, except one of your passengers'll maybe stop over." Hyde made the grimace that served him as a smile. "Old Parmiter should pay well to get his daughter back, eh?"

Shep was shocked at the notion of the dainty Parmiter girl in the hands of the Burleys. That sweet innocent little Polly. . . . The boy found that his hands were sweating on the shotgun, and his back ached with strain.

Twilight had come with soft shadows of gray and lavender when Midway showed ahead against the bleak backdrop of Snake-back Ridge. Hufnail's lay to the left of the road, a rambling house, big barn, corrals and sheds. Hyde Burley said, "Keep your mouths shut," and hunched himself back into the luggage on top. Luke swung into the yard and brought the coach to a smooth stop in the clouding dust.

Hufnail came out, fat, red-cheeked, and jovial, to open the stage door and greet the passengers, but there was worry in his eyes. Shep Landell understood this when Sheriff Saunders emerged from the house and stood staring into the north, paying scant attention to the Concord. Elroy Burley had slipped out the off-side door to circle the back of the coach. When Saunders looked that way, he saw Elroy smiling from the rear wheel and then Hyde crouched on top.

There was a moment of tense silence as Hufnail hurried the passengers to the front door of his establishment. Saunders, a trim, wiry little man in a neat black suit, masked his surprise and fear, estimated his thin chances.

"Too bad you had to be here, Saunders," said Hyde Burley.

"Expectin' some friends, Sam?" drawled

Elroy, waving toward the Madrelinos. "They won't be comin' in. They're sleepin' in the hills tonight."

"If I was you I'd ride out and join 'em," Hyde said.

Saunders stood motionless, knowing he was licked and tasting the rank bitterness of it. If he reached, he was a dead man. Luke and the kid couldn't help him, with Hyde at their backs. Hufnail and Parmiter were not in this game. The sheriff was alone and beaten, and it would be more foolish than brave to make a play.

"I was just goin' to do that, boys," Saunders said. "But I'll be back."

"If I was you I'd keep right on into Colmer," Hyde told him. "It's a lot healthier."

"Your friends ain't goin' to be much company, Sam," Elroy said, grinning. "They're sleepin' mighty sound."

"Bushwhacked, of course," Saunders muttered.

"We was some outnumbered," Elroy admitted.

Big John Parmiter came outside, a giant going to fat, florid-faced with gray hair and a gray mustache, carrying himself with dignity. "Well, aren't you goin' to take them?" he demanded of the sheriff.

"Would it do any particular good, John, to get myself shot here?"

"You're a lot of protection!" Parmiter said with scorn. "You'll never get re-elected, Sam. Never in God's world!"

"I don't expect to," Saunders said soberly, and walked away toward the corrals.

Elroy Burley strolled with a slight swagger in Parmiter's direction. "Get back inside, mister. Unless you wanta take us?"

Hyde, carbine half-raised, was looking after the small dark form of the sheriff. Luke Landell turned in the seat and said, "Don't do it, Hyde. You got enough on your head without that."

Hyde shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Just watchin', Luke. I never shot nobody in the back. You two can get down."

Shep jumped to the ground and took the reins his father tossed down. Luke descended, slow and easy, and they began unhitching the horses.

"I felt sorry for the sheriff, Dad," murmured Shep.

Luke nodded. "But Sam did right. Either way he was outa office. Dead heroes

don't get elected any more'n live cowards."

"Aren't we goin' to do *anythin'*, Dad?"

"It all depends," Luke said. "It's their first move, son."

AFTER washing up at the outside water barrel, the Landells entered the stage depot, one long room extending the depth of the building. Inside the door a bar stood on the right, and leaning on it were the Burley brothers, Elroy chatting casually with Hufnail, Hyde drinking in dour silence. At the left was a store counter backed by laden shelves. To the rear were dining room tables and chairs, and there Parmiter was talking to Hines over their drinks. The women were still absent, freshening up from the journey in the ladies' room that Hufnail had fitted out in the family living quarters.

Hufnail beamed and slid a bottle and two glasses along the wood, and Shep hoped briefly that his father might pour two drinks. But Luke filled one glass and turned the other bottomside up, so the boy retreated to lounge regretfully on the grocery counter. He could take his liquor and hold it like a man, but Luke didn't seem to think he was of age. Shep had to content himself with shaping and lighting a cigarette.

Hyde turned to Luke: "Oughta take your gun and the kid's, I reckon."

Luke shook his head. "No need of that, Hyde."

"Maybe not. But I know you ain't forgettin' the time we held you up, Luke. You didn't like that none."

"Naturally not," Luke said. "Only time I ever was stood up. But that's under the bridge a long time. We're supposed to wear guns on duty. We'll just keep 'em on, Hyde."

"All right, old timer," Hyde grumbled. "But don't take no funny notions."

"Why don't you boys saddle up and ride? Saunders'll be back with a posse."

"We got other plans," Hyde said, returning glumly to his glass.

Polly Parmiter came back, haughty as a young empress, and sat down at the table with her father and Hines. Feeling uncomfortable with her in the room, remote as she was, Shep walked out onto the broad porch and gazed out over the river and the Broadlands beyond. In a few minutes, with a clicking of heels, Belle Chompenay

swayed gracefully out and stood beside him, her perfume strong and disturbing in the peaceful dusk.

"What's goin' to happen here, kid?" she asked in her husky voice.

Shep Landell shook his head and looked thoughtfully at her. The gay smile was mostly bravado, Shep saw. Sorrow lurked in her blue eyes, although there was a defiant strength about her chin and the lift of her blonde head. Something tragic underlay the glamour.

"That girl's a cold fish," Belle went on. "But I'd hate to see her dragged off by them two boys."

"Probably wouldn't hurt her," Slim said. "They want money from the old man."

The call to supper came and the girl clutched his arm. "Can I sit with you? The Parmiters make me feel like the lowest thing alive."

Shep nodded, a bit worried about how his father would react, and Belle rewarded him with a dazzling smile. Inside, Ma Hufnail, fatter and jollier even than her husband, was serving the food.

John Parmiter said loudly: "Sorry, my dear, that you have to eat in such company," and glared at Belle and the Burleys.

Elroy laughed aloud. "Ain't it a crime?"

Hyde said: "Button up, big man, before I bend a gun on your head."

The Parmiters permitted Hines to remain at their table. The Burleys selected a vantage place of their own, while Belle sat down with Shep and his father. The meal was partaken of mainly in silence, and even the cheer of the Hufnails was dimmed and discouraged in that atmosphere. Only Elroy Burley and Luke Landell acted relaxed and at ease.

THE Burley brothers, farthest back in the deep gloomy room where they could watch the others and both outside doors, finished first and pushed back to roll smokes. The rear door opened quickly and Sheriff Saunders stood there, hand on his gun butt, a thin-intense figure against the outer darkness. The Burleys' chairs scraped back still more on opposite sides of the table. Everyone else sat frozen. There was a new boldness about Saunders, but Shep thought: *Why didn't he come in already drawn? Or shoot through a window?*

"Don't move," Saunders said crisply. "You boys are covered; the place is surrounded. Unbuckle your belts and throw 'em down."

Hyde sat black and stolid as a rock. Elroy smiled pleasantly at the sheriff. Very slowly their big hands crept toward their belt buckles. Elroy leaned slightly forward, still smiling, his hair rusty red in the lamp-light.

"You're lyin' a little, Sammy," he drawled.

"Don't reach!" warned Saunders. "There'll be a dozen slugs in you. Drop them belts!" There was a hint of panic in the sheriff, and Shep realized that his boldness had been that of desperation.

It happened so fast that Shep couldn't follow it. Elroy and Hyde moved at the same instant, Elroy coming up in a crouch, Hyde still seated. Lighting forked from either side of their table and struck Saunders rigid in the doorway, his gun-hand jerking high, shooting into the ceiling. The blasts blended and hammered through the room.

Saunders, smashed back against the door-casing, tottered forward on wobbling legs, and Polly Parmiter's scream split the fading roar of the gun echoes. Saunders fell full length, clawing at an empty table, pulling it over on top of him with a crash. Then there was silence and the smell of powder, as the Burleys wheeled to cover the room with their smoking guns.

Luke Landell had risen and Shep was surprised to find himself upright, but they both sank back into their chairs under the menacing guns. Big John Parmiter was trying to comfort his daughter, who was sobbing face down on the table. Hines looked ghastly pale, ready to faint. Hufnail and his wife stood transfixed in the wide kitchen doorway. Belle Chompenay sat shaking her golden head.

"Sorry, folks, but we didn't have any choice," Elroy Burley said. "Sam was tryin' to bluff out a mighty poor hand."

Hyde moved to the upset table and dragged Saunders' slight body out through the back door into the darkening night. Luke Landell spoke slowly, to no one in particular:

"Sam had to come back. Sometimes a man is driven against all judgment."

"He could've got 'em from a window,"

Shep said. "Or at least come in with his gun out."

"He had to try it the right way," Luke said. "Give them a chance."

Hyde Burley came back rubbing his palms on his pants, walking past his brother into the center of the long dim room. Big, black and sullen, he stood glowering there, boots wide apart, thumbs hooked in belt.

"Luke, you can hitch up and get rollin'," he said. "Parmiter, we're holdin' the girl until you get some money out here."

Elroy put a hand on Hyde's great shoulder. "Let's take some horses and hit outa here right now."

"Parmiter ain't gettin' off that easy."

"It's crazy, Hyde. We'll have the whole country on top of us."

"Parmiter'll hold 'em off," Hyde said, "if he wants his daughter back."

Big John Parmiter, face swollen almost purple with rage, whirled to Luke Landell. "You goin' to let 'em do this?"

"Can I stop them?" Luke asked. "I'm not the law."

"You'll never drive stage again!" snarled Parmiter. "We're supposed to be under your protection. I'll report you, Landell. I'll blacklist you with every line in the country!"

"Go ahead," Luke said.

"Shut up," Hyde Burley commanded. "Elroy, you go along with the boys while they hitch up. I'll stay here and talk business with the big man."

"I don't like this, Hyde," Elroy protested mildly.

Hyde snorted. "Get a movin' before we have some more company."

"All right," Elroy motioned to the Landells and followed them to the door, pausing at the bar to pick up a bottle of whiskey.

"Fifty cents for the suppers, please," Hufnail called out quaveringly. "And that bottle you got. . . ."

Elroy turned with a merry laugh. "Collect from Parmiter. He's treatin' the crowd." Outside, he shook his head. "That Hyde and the ideas he dreams up. Someday he's goin' to get us in real serious trouble."

THE stage was ready to travel again, six fresh horses harnessed in and Luke Landell on his high perch. Belle Chompenay had offered to stay with Polly Parmiter, but the girl and her father repulsed the

offer with caustic scorn. When Shep slouched awkwardly past and tried to say something to reassure Polly, she turned a frozen face on him, gesturing contemptuously toward the blonde dancehall girl.

"Stay with your own kind," she said witheringly.

Shep, cheeks and ears on fire, saw her as she really was for the first time. Not beautiful at all but spoiled, selfish and sulky. No princess but a young shrew in rich garments, full of false pride.

Big John Parmiter was blustering furious threats at the Burley brothers. Elroy laughed at him and Hyde didn't seem to hear a word the rancher said.

Shep Landell stepped out into the veranda and looked up at his father. It was still incredible to the boy that Luke was going to pull out of this without any kind of a fight. He knew how Luke, his guard dead in the boot, had fought off an outlaw gang in Cherokee Cut, driving the whole pack into the Red Hills. Maybe Luke was getting old and losing his fire. He didn't like Parmiter much anyway, and maybe he thought the girl wasn't worth saving. But to Shep that was beside the point.

The Burleys were killers from way back and there must be a good price on their heads. Luke himself had said they should be shot like mad dogs.

The passengers were aboard at last, Parmiter and Hines in the rear seat, Belle Chompenay alone on the front. Shep mounted to the seat, Luke kicked off the brake and cracked the whip, and Elroy Burley waved a whiskey bottle from the doorway as the stage lurched ahead and clattered out of the yard, southward into the night.

"You goin' to leave it like that, Dad?" Shep asked.

"I'm thinkin', son," said Luke.

The moon was a yellow horn above the pinnacles of the Spires, the Ossawippi flowed musically in willow-fringed banks beside the road, and the Broadlands rolled away to the southwest like an ocean of grass under a sparkling swarm of stars. It was a nice night, Slim reflected, a fine country, yet that afternoon how many men had died in the Madrelinos? And Sheriff Saunders was lying dead in the back yard at Midway Station.

A couple of miles down the trail Luke reined the horses down and halted the stage. Handing the reins to Shep, he picked up the Spencer carbine and said: "I'm goin' back, son. You can take the stage in all right."

"I'll go with you, Dad," Shep said quickly.

"No, you've got to drive in. That's an order, son."

"But there's two of 'em. They'll—"

"I won't play it like Sam did; I'll play it smart," Luke said. "Get the drop on 'em. It's the only way. With them holdin' the girl, a posse couldn't get close to 'em."

Big John Parmiter shouted from below: "What's the matter here? Drive along, Landell. I'm in a hurry, you fool!"

Luke climbed down and looked into the coach. "I'm goin' back. You pick up some money and some men in town. I'll see that they don't harm the girl."

Sick and shivering inside, Shep nervously clucked the horses into motion, snapping the whip a few times so his father would hear it. Well out of sight and hearing, he pulled up at the roadside. Setting the brake and snubbing the reins firmly, he grabbed the shotgun and swung lithely down onto the gravel.

"I'm goin' back too," he said. "You can drive into town if you want to."

"You can't do that!" hollered Parmiter. "Get back up there. I can't handle a six-horse team. What do you—?"

"Sit here and wait then," Shep said. "It probably won't take long." He raised his hand in farewell.

Belle Chompenay thrust her head out, silvery in the moonlight. "God bless you, boy."

Shep Landell smiled at her, saluted again, and started hiking back after his father, walking fast but taking care to stay behind Luke.

WHEN Shep reached the long straight stretch below Midway, Luke was nowhere in view. He took to the fields and the brush, circling toward the black bulk of Snakeback Ridge to approach Hufnail's from behind, moving cautiously so his dad wouldn't hear him and send him back to the stage. Threading his way through timber and underbrush, he crept toward the rear of the long building.

The living quarters and kitchen were dark, but faint lamplight showed in the public room. Peering carefully through a window, Shep saw that one lamp was glowing dully near the front. Hufnail was behind the bar, the Burley brothers hunched before it. Polly Parmiter must be tied up in a room somewhere. At any rate she wasn't in sight.

Treading with utmost stealth, Shep moved toward the kitchen door. He entered noiselessly, slipping toward the wide open entry to the dining room. From there he'd have a perfect shot at the men up front. Peeping around the corner, Shep saw that his father had got there first.

Luke Landell, carbine ready in the crook of his right arm, Colt steady in his left hand, had the Burleys backed to the bar with their hands up. Shep breathed deeply in relief, but at that moment there was a flicker of movement beyond the open front entrance. Somebody moving in the porch shadows, a man, two men, behind Luke's back. . . . Saunders' deputies or posse hands coming in, Shep thought hopefully. But then they were inside, and steel flashed a cruel arc as the first one clubbed at Luke's head with a gun barrel.

Shep heard the vicious impact, and saw his father stumble forward. Elroy Burley lunged from the bar and lashed a fist into the bowed face. Luke's head rocked back and he spun in a half-circle. Hyde Burley slugged savagely at the back of the neck and Luke went reeling forward on jacking legs, sprawling face down on the store counter. His guns were still in his hands but Luke was out, maybe dead. . . . Then one of the newcomers, the man who had struck first with the gun barrel, raised it to hit again.

Throwing the shotgun level and holding hard, Shep squeezed off one barrel. The tremendous blast roared out and the recoil jolted him violently. The charge caught the man in the middle, flung him into the corner like a bundle of clothing. The other stranger was just bringing up his sixgun when Shep pressed the second trigger and took another jarring kick. The victim, lifted bodily by the terrific wallop of the shotgun, went backwards out the doorway and floundered down into darkness.

Hufnail had disappeared behind the bar, but the Burleys were shooting at the kitchen entry, their bullets splintering wood-

work, smashing glassware. One shot shattered the lamp and left the place in sudden blackness. Shep Landell had drawn back to an angle of safety, dropping the shotgun and lifting the Colt .44 from its sheath. The Burleys had stopped firing now, and Shep didn't know what to do next. Probably the best thing would be to get out of that kitchen. He left the way he had come, crouching low into the backyard, the gun in his hand.

The night was much darker, and Shep noticed that the stars and moon were gone, clouded over with sudden density. Ominous rumblings sounded from the mountains. Then, with an abrupt vivid flare of weird blue-green, lightning split the entire sky wide open, and thunder toppled with reverberating crashes in the Madrelinos. Rain came in great slashing sheets, and Shep Landell was instantly drenched as he crept along the rear wall of the house.

It came to him that the Burleys might shoot his father as he lay there unconscious, and Shep leaped forward into long, swinging strides, head bowed under the wind-whipped rain. Terror clutched his throat as he stumbled over Saunders' body in the wet grass, but he went driving on toward the back corner, intent only on getting to the Burleys.

ROUNDING the corner in full stride, Shep bumped squarely into a solid figure. Hyde Burley. His springing momentum carried the big man back against the side of an old wagon. As Hyde's arms grappled at him, Shep slammed his gun barrel along side of Hyde's head, wrenching away when Hyde grunted and slackened his grip. Dodging back, Shep cocked the Colt and thumbed off a shot a split-second before Hyde's gun blazed blindingly through the downpour.

Shep felt the searing closeness of that slug and saw, in another brilliant flare of lightning, Hyde's hulking body buckle and writhe on the wagon wheel. Throwing down again, Shep hammered another shot into that huge frame, and Hyde Burley weaved forward off the wheel, staggering and shrinking strangely in the rain, pitching headlong into the fresh mud beside the building.

Panting and shaken, Shep Landell hurried over him and raced on toward the front

of the house. Lightning burst green and jagged overhead, and Shep glimpsed the smiling face of Elroy Burley behind a gun at the porch corner. He knew he was a goner even as he raised and cocked his own .44. . . .

Luke Landell, roused by the storm's fury came back to life at the grocery counter. Holding the sixgun, Luke pushed away from the wood and turned to the dark room. Lightning flared, revealing the horrified face of Hufnail behind the bar, and Hufnail pointed frantically toward the veranda. Luke couldn't stand up but he could crawl, and he dragged himself out through the doorway.

A greenish flame from above showed Elroy Burley at the corner of the porch, bringing his gun to bear on somebody. Bracing himself on his knees and one hand, Luke lifted his gun and fired. The Colt almost bucked out of Luke's hand, and he couldn't seem to line it again. But it wasn't necessary. Elroy spun away from the wall and fell flat on his face.

Just then Shep reached the corner. Plunging forward, he crouched dripping and sobbing for breath at his father's side.

"Are you hurt bad, Dad?" he asked.

"No—I'm all right. Just—kinda—knocked out."

Hufnail lighted the lamp over the bar and came out with a bucket of water and a towel. Shep bathed his dad's battered face and head with tender care. After a few minutes he helped Luke to his feet and inside to the bar. Hufnail had covered the body in the corner with a blanket. Shep hauled it outside to lie with Elroy Burley and the other dead man, and Hufnail

fetches more blankets to shroud all three of them. Hyde Burley and Saunders were out in the rain, but it didn't matter now.

"My Lord, what a night!" moaned Hufnail. "First the sheriff, then four outlaws. All dead at Midway, five of them in one night! Whoever heard of such a thing?"

"You shouldn't have come back, boy," Luke said. "But it's a damn good thing for me that you did! I wasn't figurin' on two extra hands with 'em."

Shep Landell said nothing. He felt remote and dazed. The stench of powder made him ill. Walking to the doorway on wooden legs, he saw that the storm had ceased, as suddenly as it had started.

Ma Hufnail was leading Polly Parmiter in from the other part of the house, telling her how Shep Landell and his father had come back to save her. The girl walked straight to Slim, her face radiant. "You were wonderful!" she breathed.

"Thanks," Shep said absently. "I think the stage's comin' back. Your father'll be here in a minute."

He turned and left her at the door, feeling somewhat better as he strode back to his father's side. He didn't like her assumption that he had done it entirely for her. He hadn't done it for her at all, as a matter of fact. He had come back for his father.

"A bottle of your best, Hufnail," Luke Landell said with a grave smile. "And two glasses, if you please."

Shep smiled happily as his father poured two drinks and handed him one of them. They clicked glasses and drank together for the first time. That was the tribute the boy wanted, the one that mattered most of all.

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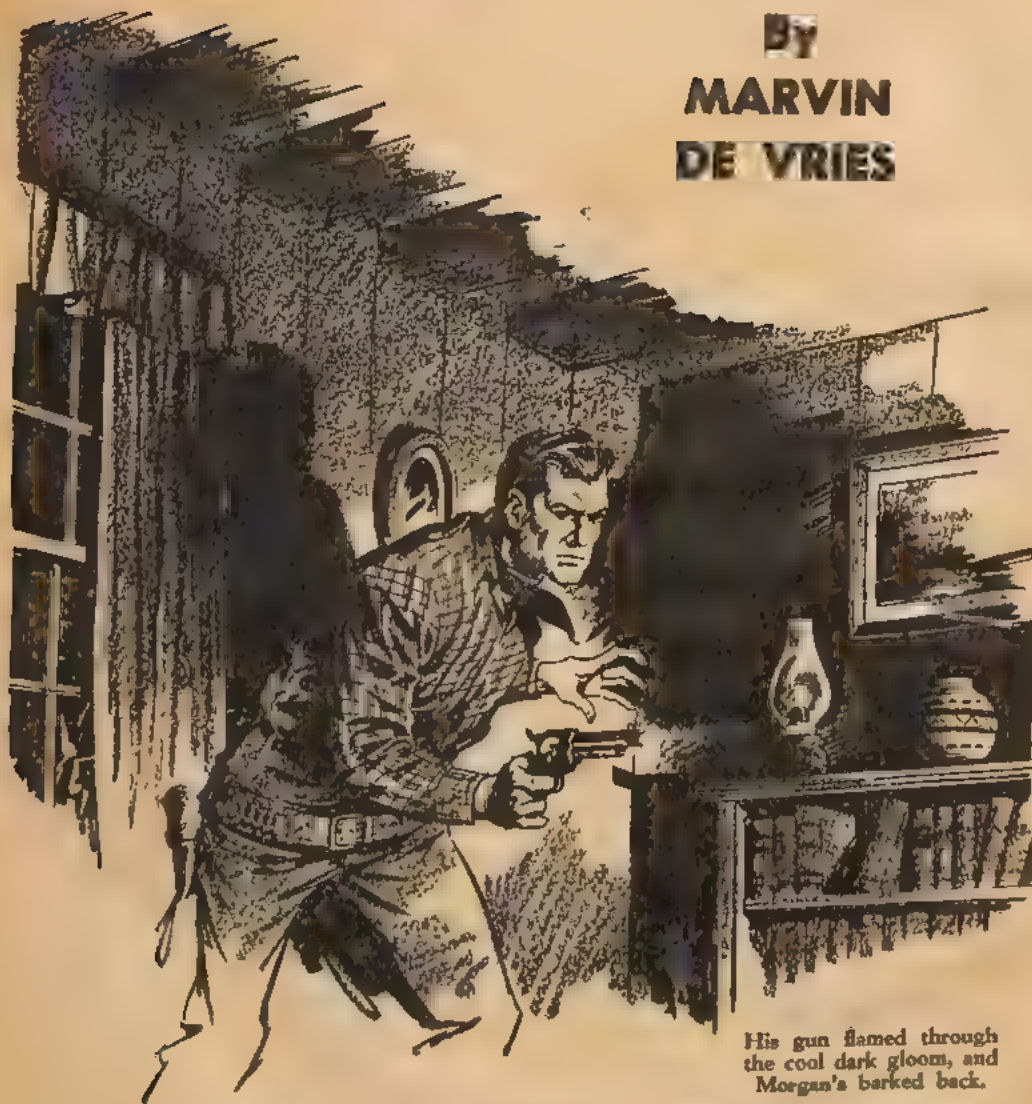
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*Punch-Packed Old-West
Novelette*

By

**MARVIN
DE VRIES**



His gun flamed through
the cool dark gloom, and
Morgan's barked back.

**Wyat Morgan, man-in-the-middle between two mighty spreads, knew
it took years of grueling patience to damp a blood-feud's fire—and
one single powdersmoke second to fan it into roaring hell.**

BUFFER RANGE



CHAPTER

1

Death in Masquerade

Wyat Morgan stood beside the bunkhouse door, his hands behind him, his long fingers tapping idly against the bunkhouse wall. It was Sunday morning, with its usual Sunday-morning service on the TF on-a-Rail. Fair weather or foul, old

Toller Bough held a service for the crew, and Wyatt Morgan was considering whether he wanted to be uncivil enough to dig out.

He finally decided he didn't want to be. This was an important occasion to Toller Bough, who was earnest-minded and crammed with a piety he wanted all to share, and Morgan felt he owed him the courtesy of staying. The rest of the crew trooped out, sheepish or sober according

to their nature, probably counting up their Sunday-night sins and trying to figure out how to put them into acceptable words.

Young Clew Bough, going on nineteen, a year younger than his sister, Nancy, came from the main house in his Sunday best. If he were embarrassed by this Sunday morning service, he didn't show it, and Morgan liked him for it. Clew announced that his father would be out directly.

"No rush," somebody muttered glumly.

The men laughed, and Clew Bough joined in. Wyat Morgan listened for the sound of jeering, but couldn't hear it. There was only rue in their laughter, the wry regret of men who knew they had fallen from grace during the week gone by, and Toller Bough would have to hear about it.

Ute Urk, a new man, who had never attended one of these Sunday morning services, came outside, his eyes bleary and bloodshot from his Sunday-night spree. He was the only man to wear a gun, and Toller Bough would probably tell him to lay it aside for the service.

"Well," he spoke up, as if this was simply going to kill him, "when do we start commencing? How do I hold my face, anyhow—stretch it out long an' pious, or may I look halfway human?"

"You can try," somebody told him, and got a laugh Ute Urk didn't like.

He walked past Morgan, then suddenly recollected something, and stopped. "The old guy at the post office gave me a letter for you last night," he remarked, digging into his pocket for it. "I didn't recollect till right now."

"That's all right," Morgan said, taking the letter. "Thanks."

It was post-marked *Comanche*, and had been mailed more than a week ago. Ask Toller Bough, it read, *who burned you out of your Triangle M place last winter. He knows, but he ain't told because he's scairt stiff of your otherside neighbor, Boone Taunt.*

Wyat Morgan scowled, and read it again. He owned the Triangle M. It was a small piece of range on Rowdy Run, wedged like an ax head between Toller Bough's big TF on-a-Rail and Boone Taunt's big BAT. It was a buffer between the two big places and served to keep them out of each other's hair. During the past winter the Triangle M buildings had burned to the ground.

Wyat Morgan knew it was sheer accident, but, under the circumstances, there was bound to be gossip; and this letter in his hand, inferring that Toller Bough knew Boone Taunt had burned him out but didn't dare to say so for fear of stirring up old troubles between the two places, was more of the same. Wyat Morgan had heard it before, but this was the first time anyone had taken the trouble to put it into writing.

"Drivel," he muttered. "Downright drivel." Then he saw Toller Bough coming from the house and slipped the letter into his hip pocket.

TOLLER BOUGH put on spectacles and waited for the noise to quiet down. Then he read a piece of scripture, and they sang a familiar hymn. Comments and a general discussion of grass-roots religion followed, the unaccustomed exercise stretching a lot of mental muscle. Wyat Morgan thought this whole thing was a good idea, and Toller Bough's special talent kept it all seemly.

Sometimes, a small titter went the rounds when a puncher made his blunt way through a passel of sin he had committed, and the words came out blunter than he had intended. Clew Bough grinned with the rest, and his pride, young and sensitive as it might be, was nowise hurt. He even got up to have his own mild say, a little abashed by his age, but not at all by what was going on. It surprised Wyat Morgan. *I know, he thought, if Toller Bough was my father this would make my skin crawl, at least when I was Clew's age.*

Willy Tilt, who had worked on TF several years, got up and had a practical question to ask. "Last night Taunt's BAT was in town full force, and I got into a ruckus with that ugly-lookin' Tip Humley. This was in the Armadillo around nine o'clock. He elbowed my space at the bar an' I took offense. I took a poke at him and then I recollected what has been said at these here meetings an' I let him hit me back."

"That's Scripture," Toller Bough applauded.

"Yes," Willy agreed, "but I want to know how much of that a man's got to take. Sometime I'm going to plow right in an' fix his clock."

"That's been brought up here before," Toller Bough stated. "Now that we have

a new man here, probably I better repeat what I've said again and again. We want no trouble with BAT, and Boone Taunt wants no trouble with us. Ever since the big flare-up five years ago, when half of his crew and half of mine were shot to death, we have managed to keep the peace, and we mean to keep it to the end. So if a man galls you into a fight, back away from it. I insist on that, and I know Boone Taunt, the pompous old devil, will tell his men the same. We've settled our differences, and I won't allow any man in this crew to take it on himself to raise bad blood between us. Some of you know what it was like." He turned to Wyatt Morgan. "You know, Wyatt."

Morgan nodded.

"Yes," Bough went on. "Wyat knows. That fight was over his place on Rowdy Run. Morgan didn't own it then. It was disputed range. BAT wanted it, and I wanted it, but in the end we both agreed that neither of us would ever make a move against it again. The bargain still stands."

"Wyat Morgan's father was sheriff at the time, and he lost his life trying to keep the peace. That's why we turned the strip over to Morgan, and it's worked out. When he was burned out last winter, I could have claimed Boone Taunt did it, and Taunt could have claimed I did, but nothing like that was said, except by town gossips, and I know Morgan doesn't put any stock in any of that. You're new here, Urk, but I want you to keep all that in mind. Don't fight with them."

Urk grinned a little; it looked insolent and impudent to Wyatt Morgan, but he put it down to his natural prejudice against the man.

"I didn't know all that," Urk spoke up, "and it comes a little late, because I had quite a rumpus with that same ranny Willy mentioned. He must've been on the war-path. However, it turned out a kind of a draw, but I told him next time I saw him I'd break his back."

"You know now what is involved," Toller Bough said severely. "So let it go. I see we've gotten a little off the track here. Is there anything else any of you would like to unburden himself of?"

There was a brief silence. Then Urk spoke again, and this time Wyatt Morgan was convinced of his impudence. "Why,

yes," he said, keeping his face solemn as an owl, "I do have something more to say."

"Well," Toller Bough said, "go right ahead."

"It's about a girl," Urk went on. "This happened last night, too. Girls are my one great weakness, boss. You know how it is. The minute I seen this one I couldn't keep my eyes off her. I think I ought to speak up about it, and make a clean sweep."

Some of the men tittered, and Urk gave them a slow reproving look. If Bough had any idea Urk was pulling his leg, he didn't let on.

"Uh—what kind of a girl are you talking about, Urk?" he asked, earnestly.

"A blonde," Urk answered. "I only get that way about blondes."

One puncher let out a sudden guffaw, and shoved his fist in his mouth to strangle it.

"It isn't a laughing matter," Urk went on, still solemn as an owl.

Clew Bough suddenly caught on what Urk was up to. His face turned beet-red, and he started to back away as inconspicuously as possible. Shame and humilia-



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tion engulfed him. Wyat Morgan was watching him, and could see what was going on in his mind.

"What I want to know is if you think I'm lost," Urk went on. He was going to say more, but Morgan grabbed him by the seat of his pants and pulled him down.

"Quit that damned monkey business, will you?" he muttered in a low voice. "Quit it."

Ute Urk went down with a thud, and he was mad before he hit the ground. He tried to break his fall with one hand, and struck out at Morgan with the other. Morgan dodged. The blow slid along his cheek, and Urk's fist smacked against the bunkhouse wall. Urk howled and cringed, then tried another with his other hand. Morgan ducked his head between his knees, and Ute Urk's steam carried him clear over Morgan's back, and sprawled him flat on the other side. By the time he got his bearings, Morgan was on his feet waiting.

"Stop it, Wyat," Toller Bough sputtered. "Let's not have any of that."

WYAT MORGAN didn't look back. Ute Urk took his time getting up, but when he did he had his gun in his hands. He made a spinning motion, whipping the gun around, but before he could level it off, Morgan kicked it out of his hand. Ute Urk spun again, going after the weapon on all fours, and Morgan kicked him again. Clew, meanwhile, picked up the gun, and pocketed it.

Toller Bough caught Morgan by the shoulder, trying once again to stop the fight, but Morgan jerked away and slid along the bunkhouse wall to get some elbow room. Urk stuck out his boot before Morgan could get past, and tripped him. Morgan stumbled forward trying to catch his balance. Urk caught him from behind, his fingers hitching in Morgan's hip pocket. The pocket gave way, Morgan lurched on, and finally went down with his face in the dirt. Ute Urk jumped him with both boots, kicking and stamping, until Morgan rolled sideways and got out from under.

A small terrier, the yard rat-catcher, got too close, and Urk gave it a hard kick that sent it end over end out of reach. Clew Bough cat-footed around the edges of the fight, his dark eyes gleaming. Toller Bough didn't try to interfere again. Morgan got

in a good blow that sent Urk reeling along the bunkhouse wall. His pants caught on a splinter and ripped from knee to hip. Morgan hit him again, and his head rattled against the boards of the wall like a dry gourd.

Morgan had a chance to finish it then and there, but his knee suddenly gave way, probably from a kick he had gotten, and he sagged down. Urk kicked him again, and Morgan lost his wind. His arms went limp, and his sight blurred. Urk howled suddenly, and lunged again. Morgan twisted sideways, and avoided it. His sight began to clear, his strength came back, but he stayed on his knees. Urk thought he had him whipped, and charged again. Morgan crouched, his fist on the ground, and when Urk got close enough, he drove it up, and it landed solidly in the pit of Urk's stomach. It stopped him in his tracks, and a shuddering breath came out of his throat. Then his whole front seemed to cave in, and he twisted down on the ground in a senseless heap.

Wyat Morgan backed off and sat down on the bunkhouse step.

"Anyway," Toller Bough muttered, "I don't like it, Wyat."

"I do," Clew chimed in. "I like it fine. I wish I'd done it." He picked up the letter Morgan had lost and handed it back. Morgan held it in his hand a moment, and almost threw it to the dog who loved to tear things to bits. Instead, he stuffed it in his pocket, then pulled it out again, and looked at it dubiously.

His name was on the envelope, and it looked exactly like the one Ute Urk had given him. But it wasn't. That one was still in his pocket. This was an entirely different letter. In all likelihood Ute Urk had lost it in the fight. It had been opened, and he noticed a small cross in one corner, perhaps an identifying mark of some kind to keep the two apart. The dog stood in front of him, its head cocked, an eager look in its eyes.

"Sorry, pup," Morgan said. "Later, maybe."

Then he put the letter in his pocket with the other one, unaware that in the end it might cost him his life...

This second letter made a little more sense than the one Ute Urk had handed him.

Wyat Morgan, Esq.,
Channing Junction,
Palo Pinto County, Texas

Sunday p.m. is okay for me. I don't know that country, but if Rowdy Run is a crick I'll find it, and meet you at what you call The Falls. You better use this letter to make yourself known to me, and I will use yours to me likewise. After all, we ain't going to talk about how to fry fish. According to your tell, you were burned out the past winter and know who did it. My job, I reckon, is to even the score, and that's all right with me if it pays out, but you got to show me. I am always willing to talk over a deal.

The letter wasn't signed. Ute Urk had missed it after he came to, and Morgan could see the loss had thrown him into a sharp panic. But Urk had no idea who had it and apparently didn't dare to make inquiries. He staggered around like a Saturday-night drunk, and Toller Bough had ordered him to bed. Wyatt Morgan, meanwhile, intended to keep the appointment.

Spring was beginning to throw its bright green promise across the land. The air was gay with bird songs. His horse felt frisky and shied at anything it could find to shy at. Leaving TF on-a-Rail behind, Morgan reached his own Triangle S, a narrow wedge-shaped piece of land shaved off the edges of his two big neighbors.

He followed the line fence toward Rowdy Run and saw small scatterings of his own Triangle S stock grazing on the fresh green grass. It made him eager to come back here for good and get his buildings up again so he could make his marriage proposal to Clew Bough's bright-haired sister, Nancy, who had long since made a sure place for herself in his heart.

He realized, of course, what all that was going to mean in the valley. Triangle-M was buffer range. Boone Taunt didn't like it that he was temporarily working for Bough for wages, and he wouldn't like to see Morgan fetch Nancy Bough to the Triangle M as his bride. It would upset the precarious balance that had been established between the two places. Somehow, Boone Taunt had to be reassured.

The thunder of the falls reached his ears,

and when he got close enough for his first look, he saw a man standing on the rocks beside it. The man was watching him, and Morgan waved, his eyes slanting down to the set of his gun before he hurried forward.

"Nice place," the stranger remarked when Morgan was near enough.

Morgan nodded, his eyes going over the man on the rocks from head to foot. There was no mistaking what he was. All his gear and everything he wore had the mark of weather and hard usage on it. His voice, raised against the noise of the falls, had a dry crackling sound. His lips hardly moved. His whole face was a mask, betraying nothing, except that he was a tough customer.

"Nice day, too," Morgan remarked.

He felt stalled. This was tricky business. The minute he opened his mouth he was apt to put his foot in it. He didn't know the man's name. He didn't know how much information had passed between him and Ute Urk. He didn't know if the letter he had in his pocket was the only means this man had of identifying him. And guessing at all these things was likely to be risky business.

"Let's get out of this noise," Morgan muttered, swinging his horse.

CHAPTER

2

Just One Spark . . .

The stranger followed him, leading his animal. Morgan dismounted. A flat-lipped grin suddenly creased his lips. "Danun this beating around the bush," he muttered, and got out the letter.

"Damned corny business, I'll tell you," the stranger remarked, but he got out his letter and showed it.

His name was Sid Copelle. Morgan wiped his hand across his face, then got out his makings and tried to roll a smoke. "It's your own idea," he reminded Copelle.

"Corny, anyway," Copelle insisted. "What beats me is why you had those letters addressed to Wyatt Morgan. That's too foxy for words."

"This is tricky business," Morgan said.

"No use makin' it any trickier. S'pose Morgan had called for those letters himself?"

"He don't get to town much. TF boys always fetch an' carry for him."

"All the same, I don't like black on white, and I'll take that letter."

"It's all right," Morgan said.

"The hell it is. I'll take it, I said."

There was too much at issue here for Morgan to refuse pointblank, and he handed it over. "It makes no nevermind to me."

"The fact is," Copelle went on, "I'm not so sure I'm going through with this. I've been scoutin' around an' I can see what you're up to. You want Wyat Morgan croaked, don't you, and I'm not so sure he'll take to it kindly."

Morgan grinned. "I didn't know you wanted anybody to take to it kindly before you did it."

"I'm a soft-hearted bugger." He picked up a pointed stone and drew an outline of the valley on the ground. "I don't go at anything half-cocked, either. This is what you're up to. Here's BAT an' over here on the other end is TF on-a-Rail. You want to own this wedge in between. When you get that, you'll play BAT against TF because they both run for a fraid hole the minute anybody says 'Boo'. By working it right and prodding 'em further and further apart, you think you're going to wind up top dog."

"What's wrong with that?"

"You ain't man enough to work it, Urk. You're a small-timer. You don't have the guts." A small tantalizing grin showed around his lips. He was enjoying this like Urk had enjoyed pulling Toller Bough's leg in the TF ranch-yard.

"Now, they got an agreement between them about Morgan's piece and that's all right. But I'll tell you this—an agreement like that is a stick of dynamite with a fuse at both ends. Either side can light it, and when a chump starts prodding at 'em, that's what they'll do. They'll blow each other up and you'll go with it, and that won't help you much. On the other hand, they're both shy as mockingbirds, and a good man could play 'em against each other till he made something of it. But, as I say, I don't think you've got it in you."

"Maybe you'd like to take over," Morgan grumbled.

"Maybe," Copelle answered, the tantalizing grin going again. Then he laughed

aloud with sudden good humor, and slapped Morgan on the back. "You're jumpy, Urk."

"Not at all," Morgan said, and it was probably true, until he glanced over his shoulder and saw Ute Urk riding their way. "Hell's hot door handles!" he muttered. "Here comes—uh—Morgan now."

Copelle glanced up. The grin stayed on his face. "Maybe he smells a skunk," he remarked. "Maybe we ought to croak him right—"

"You clear out," Morgan broke in. "I'll give him a line."

"That's a good idea," Copelle agreed, but he took his own time getting out of sight.

Wyat Morgan straightened up and walked toward Urk, who had pulled up and was studying the brush along the creek. When he caught sight of Morgan, he muttered an oath and came forward again. Apparently, Clew Bough had returned his gun. He had it strapped on now, and Morgan felt pretty sure it wouldn't take much to prod him into using it.

All at once, he felt pretty sure of something else, too, something that swung him around in a futile attempt to locate Sid Copelle. This was an ambush. Copelle had known right from the start who he was, and he had talked as much as he had because he knew Morgan wasn't going to leave this place alive. And, with Urk in front of him and Copelle behind him, it didn't look likely that he would.

"You stick your long nose into a lot of stuff that ain't any of your mix, don't you?" Urk blustered.

"Hadn't thought of it that way," Morgan answered.

"Sometimes," Morgan went on quietly, "it's hard to say what a man's business is."

UTE URK frowned and looked around again. Morgan could see what was going on in his mind. He didn't want to ask, but he wanted to know if Morgan was here alone. Morgan let him worry about it, although it made him wonder, if, after all, this was the ambush he had thought it was. He moved sideways, trying to put some brush behind him, then started to mount.

"Hold it," Urk ordered, grabbing his gun. "You ain't going anywhere. Where's Copelle?"

"Who?"

"Don't try that. You ain't that cagey. No, you ain't going nowhere. Not by a damsite."

Morgan glanced back, trying to line himself up so the brush would protect him from behind. He didn't want it coming at him from both ways.

Urk stopped him again and suddenly raised his voice and called for Copelle. "Show yourself, danunit. What ails you? I know you're back there."

"I'm right here," Copelle called. Then his gun roared, and Morgan flung himself to the ground and rolled.

Copelle's lead didn't come anywhere near him. It wasn't meant to. It was meant for Ute Urk, and it hit the mark. Urk reared up in the saddle as if he had hung himself on a rope. A red blotch blossomed on his shirt front. His horse whipped sideways, and Urk didn't go along. For a second, he sat up there on thin air, legs and arms flopping. Then he crashed to the ground in a dead heap.

Copelle came out from behind the rocks. The sardonic grin was back on his face. His gun hung down from his limp fingers, a wisp of dead smoke curling off the barrel. "What's eatin' you?" he inquired. "What're you crawlin' around on the ground for?"

"I don't know," Morgan said sheepishly. "Tryin' to go places where nobody can see me, I reckon."

"I told you you didn't have it in you if it came to a pinch," Copelle crowed. "Hell, man, Morgan would have killed you. You're very lucky, friend, that I was around."

"Mebbeso," Morgan agreed, though he doubted it.

Sid Copelle laughed again, holstered his gun, and moved back to his horse. Morgan watched him a moment, his face clouding, then mounted and rode the other way.

* * *

Boone Taunt called on Toller Bough at the TF on-a-Rail soon after Ute Urk rode off to keep his rendezvous with Sid Copelle at the Falls. Taunt was a lean, sharp-eyed old man with a quick temper, although in his dealings with Toller Bough he always tried to control himself. He wore a mustache, waxed at the tips, which was the reason Toller Bough called him "a pompous

old devil," or, more accurately, an "aristocratic old buzzard." Taunt had a ramrod up his back, there was no doubt of that, and it was hard for him to bend or adapt himself to circumstances.

The big flareup between the two places had left its deep scars on him as much as it had on Toller Bough, and fear, bone-deep fear that through some happenstance he couldn't foresee it might happen again, was a day and night load on his shoulders.

Toller Bough saw him coming and walked out into the yard to meet him. Nancy Bough, bright-haired and cool in the shade of the long gallery, was in a mild sulk because Wyatt Morgan had ridden away, when it was his usual pleasure to spend a Sunday afternoon with her.

"I'm glad to see you, Boone," Toller Bough spoke up. "You don't come as often as I would like. Light and come to the porch."

"No, thank you, Toller," Taunt answered stiffly. "I won't take much of your time."

"I was only napping."

"I'm sorry I disturbed you. I'll come to the point. I understand you have a new rider here by the name of Ute Urk."

"Why, yes, I do," Toller answered, canting his head to one side in an attitude of mild humility. "I heard he had a little trouble in town last night with one of your men. It's very unfortunate. I talked to them all this morning, Boone. I don't like these little flare-ups any better than you do."

"I don't call it a little flare-up, Toller," Taunt stated, compressing his lips. "My man, Tip Humley, was shot."

Toller Bough gulped, and raised a hand as if he wanted to hold the news away from him. "You must be mistaken, Taunt."

"I'm not mistaken. I know a bullet hole when I see one."

"I mean, I'm sure my boys had nothing to do with it."

"I'm not sure, I'm sorry to say. As usual, Humley started for home after the others had gone, and he was bushwhacked on the way. It wouldn't have been a serious wound, but we didn't find him until morning and he had lost a lot of blood. When he recovered consciousness, he told me your man, Ute Urk, had done it. They had words in town, and after Urk shot him,

he spoke up and made a brag about it. Humley recognized the sound of his voice."

TOLLER BOUGH cupped his hands around his mouth and called Urk's name. Turning to Taunt again, he said, "We'll find out what this is all about right here and now."

Clew Bough came to the bunkhouse door, and called out that Urk had left some time ago.

"Where'd he go?"

Clew shrugged. "He was mad as a hornet. He didn't say a word to anybody. You want me?"

Toller Bough shook his head, and promised Boone Taunt he would look into it thoroughly.

"I've done that, Toller," Taunt stated stiffly. "I want that man turned over to the sheriff before nightfall, or I won't answer for the consequences."

"What consequences?" Toller Bough asked.

"Don't be stupid," Taunt answered with his first show of temper.

"I'll look into it," Toller repeated. "I want the facts as much as you do, Boone."

"I've given you those. I'm warning you, Toller. Don't play around with this. My men won't stand for it."

"I can't throw Urk to the dogs on Tip Humley's say-so."

"Do you mean to imply that Humley might be lying?"

"I didn't say that."

"You know what it means if we make one false move."

"If the facts bear you out, I'll take Urk in myself. I'm glad you came to me instead of going to the sheriff. It was the right thing to do. We've got to be careful, Boone."

Boone Taunt nodded abruptly and swung away, "Good day, sir." He stopped a moment to say a polite word to Nancy, then rode on, and Toller Bough went to the bunkhouse.

Before he made up his mind to anything at all, he wanted to talk to Wyatt Morgan, who seemed to know how to use his head, but Clew told him Morgan had ridden off right after dinner. "Well, where's Urk then?" Toller demanded.

"I don't know that either," Clew answered

Everyone was listening, although the men at the table pretended to keep on with their card game. A call from Boone Taunt was a spicy event, and they were all ears. Toller Bough seemed inclined to disappoint them. He headed for the door without a word, but before he got there, he turned to face them again and made a reluctant announcement:

"Tip Humley was shot last night. Somebody bushwhacked him on the way home. He said it was Ute Urk. I wish you boys would ride around and find Urk. I don't want him to get into trouble before we find out how this stacks up."

"Urk came home with us last night," Willy Tilt spoke up. "Tip Humley was still in the Armadillo when we left."

Toller Bough pursed his lips. "Then Urk's in the clear."

"Most certainly."

"I don't reckon that'll suit Boone Taunt," Bough muttered.

"I never spent much time worrying about that," Willy Tilt stated. "Besides, that Tip Humley can lie a blue streak."

"Go find Urk," Toller Bough repeated and went outside.

He suddenly felt old and weary. The ghosts of men he had lost in that awful time haunted him eternally, and he glanced up at the hillside where they lay, letting his eyes moon drearily along their small crosses. Always and eternally since then, he had done everything in his power to avoid trouble with BAT, and what he meant to do now, he didn't know.

It would be an easier thing to handle if Boone Taunt's version was true. But it couldn't be, not after what Willy Tilt had said. He would do much for the sake of peace, but, with all his sense of righteousness and justice, he couldn't do anything but stand by Ute Urk, regardless of the demands put upon him by Boone Taunt. He sat down heavily on the edge of the gallery, and Nancy came and sat beside him.

"I heard the talk," she told him. "Maybe Urk pulled out for good. He didn't fit in here, anyway."

"No, his stuff's in the bunkhouse. Where's Wyatt?"

"If I knew," she said, a little ruefully, "I'd go out and follow him."

"Now, Nancy."

"Well, that's so."

The men were making quite a to-do about saddling up. They wore their guns, and Toller Bough frowned bleakly.

"Clew's planning on going to town," Nancy spoke up. "Tell him not to go with the men. Sue Lester is expecting him."

"Clew," Toller called, "I'll need you here a while."

Willy Tilt swung up and started away, but he stopped again before he got halfway across the yard and held up his hand. Then he pointed to the hill behind the barn, and they all looked that way. Toller Bough's breath whooshed out at the sight, and he sat down heavily again.

The hill had a cover of small aspen, the leaves spring-bright and silvery, and it made a pretty sight against the blue sky. But Toller Bough didn't see it. All he saw was Ute Urk's horse, coming empty-saddled down the slope with stirrups flopping....

CHAPTER

3

33 Replies

After his encounter with Copelle, Wyatt Morgan rode south again, toward the charred ruins that had been his Triangle M buildings. The unexpected outcome of the encounter shocked him, and convinced him that Copelle knew right from the start who he was and had carried out his grim joke to its sudden surprising conclusion for a purpose.

He wondered if the sound of the shooting could have carried as far as BAT, or in the other direction to TF, and whether he shouldn't have loaded Ute Urk on his horse and carried him back to the TF bunkhouse. But his horse was a spooky animal, and it was probably wiser to send out a wagon.

Far in the distance, he saw some TF riders fanning out along the sloping ground that rose to the aspen hills, and he wondered what particular chore Toller Bough had sent them on, but he soon lost sight of them.

A little later, he saw Boone Taunt riding across Triangle M range on his way home, and he surmised he had probably paid one of his rare calls on Toller Bough. Two BAT riders came to meet him, and they stopped to hold a council of some kind. Finally, the three of them went on toward

BAT, the two punchers trailing reluctantly behind.

From this high ground, Morgan could see in all directions, but he soon left it behind. A spring breeze followed him down the slope, but before he got very far along, a sudden puff of sound, like the shattering of a drum-head, brought him to a stop. It was faint and far off, but he didn't think he was mistaken about it. It was gunfire.

He turned and went back to high ground. Before he reached the top, he heard several more shots. The first thing he saw when he topped the rise was a saddled horse, a TF animal, bolting riderless for home. It came out of a wash that cut across Triangle M range, and it probably belonged to one of the riders he had seen climbing the aspen hills.

It didn't take him long to reach the cut. It wasn't deep, but it was badly eroded, and it took him some time to spot anything unusual. Finally, he saw a man crawling along the ground on all fours, and recognized Willy Tilt. He called down, but Willy didn't answer. A gun barked, and Willy ducked. Morgan noticed two BAT horses standing behind a motte of scrub willow, but he couldn't locate the riders.

"What in hell do you think you're up to, Willy?" he yelled down.

"You keep outa this," Willy yelled back, his voice riddled with exasperation. "You want to get me shot?"

"Who's tryin' to shoot you?"

"BAT, you dummy. They got Ute Urk. They were totin' him home, and we jumped 'em."

"You go on back," Morgan went on. "I'll settle this from up here. Go on, Willy."

Morgan moved along the edge, and finally caught sight of the two BAT riders flattened out behind a small outcrop of hardpan. Ute Urk lay on his back on the ground beside them.

"What's wrong here?" Morgan yelled down.

"What does it look like?" a BAT rider yelled back. "This dirty buzzard killed Tip Humley."

"That's a lie," Willy Tilt chimed in. "Ute Urk came home with us, and Humley was still in town."

"You get away from up there," the BAT rider warned Morgan.

Morgan didn't move, and the BAT rider

fired a shot. The bullet hit the edge and kicked up a puff of dust. "How d'you like that?" Willy jeered.

Morgan finally spotted two more TF riders working their way forward along the far side of the wash. It wouldn't take them long to flush BAT out of cover. One of them over there had a bloody arm, and Morgan guessed he was probably the one who had lost his horse.

"That's enough of this," Morgan called. "I happen to know BAT didn't shoot Ute Urk. Now cool off, all of you!"

"They started it," Willy yelled.

"You lie," BAT yelled back. "You keep your nose outa this, Morgan. If they want a fight, they'll get it. It's none of your mix."

"I'm makin' it mine," Morgan answered. "Now listen to me, all of you. I've got everyone of you covered with my gun, and I'll use it on the first man who won't take orders, TF or BAT, it's all the same to me. You two, way over there, back off and get to your horses. You, too, Willy."

"A fine damn stinker you turned out to be," Willy sputtered.

"Back off," Morgan repeated. "You do the same, BAT. Leave Urk there."

He got them into motion, but they moved grudgingly. "All right," he hurried them along, "you can get up. Hurry it up, all of you."

The two BAT riders reached their horses. Willy and the two yonder men had further to go, and Willy was still putting up an argument. He was mad clear through and was bound and determined to make a last fool move. The BAT boys had mounted and made plain targets. In hot-headed defiance of Morgan's warning, Willy flung himself down again behind what he thought was cover from Morgan's gun, and threw a quick shot at BAT.

Morgan fired, and Willy's gun dribbled out of his hand. He let out a wild howl and threw up his arm. It was kinked like a broken twig between elbow and wrist.

"You busted my arm, you dirty buzzard, you," he raved, but when Morgan ordered him again to back off, he backed.

BAT got started, leaving Ute Urk behind. When they had cleared out, Morgan wiped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. He didn't go down into the cut. Temps had to cool before he could rea-

son with them. But he watched them load Urk on a horse and head for home, and when he was sure no one would try to circle back and have another go at it, he mounted and went his own way. . . .

SID COPELLE heard this rumpus going on—at least, he heard the gunfire—and it put a grin on his face. "Jangles," he told his camp flunky, a roustabout boy who had somehow tied himself to Copelle's shirt-tail, "BAT and TF on-a-Rail have just gone an' jumped down each other's throats. What d'you think of that?"

Jangles swept the long coarse hair out of his eyes with a dirty hand. "I think they're nuts."

"No, they're not nuts. They're dancin' to my tune."

"That makes 'em nuts."

"I got another chore for you, Jangles."

Jangles' eyes came up again. "What now?" This time he let his hair hang, and he looked like some odd breed of dog waiting for orders. "You want me to plug Morgan?"

"No. Guess again."

Jangles scratched his head. "Go pick up the dead after they get through down there?"

Copelle laughed. This kid was a tough talker. Sometimes he tickled Copelle half to death with his insolence and arrogance and bed-rock viciousness, but on the whole Copelle didn't like him. He didn't have the ordinary animal-decency to keep himself clean, he had too much gab, and he was tricky and shifty beyond all reasonable limits. Copelle didn't like those particular traits, although he had no qualms about using them when they suited his purpose.

"We'll leave the dead scattered around, Jangles," he said. "It makes a good show. We're climbing a steep slant, Jangles, and all we want is to keep goin'. Onward and upward."

"Half the time you sound like you're upward all right—straight up a tree," Jangles answered, sullenly spitting at a green-winged darning-needle. "I don't cotton to guessing games, and I don't cotton to these damn camp chores no more, neither." He kicked at a piece of fire-wood, and sent it flying. "Hell, give me somethin' worth a man's time."

"I gave you-a whack at that BAT rider,

Tip Humley, last night, didn't I?" Copelle asked.

"Yeah," Jangles grunted. "I did all right, too. You wanted him plugged so he'd be just about dead, but not quite. That's a tall order if you want to know, but I did it. An' I made out like I was Ute Urk so that dumb puncher could tell his boss who bushwhacked him. I s'pose that row they're havin' down there is the result."

"I reckon. You did right well, Jangles."

"Damn' tootin'. I don't know anybody who coulda done better."

"You're quite some pumpkins."

"Damn' tootin'. First thing you know I'll be showin' you up."

"Don't go trying that," Copelle said mildly.

Jangles tried to outstare him, out of sheer deviltry, perhaps, and perhaps not, but his eyes finally went down. "What's next?" he mumbled.

"Clew Bough's our meat. He's that kid we saw in town last night."

"Yeah, I know," Jangles answered crankily.

"You can go whole-hog on him. I want him on ice. And when you've done the job, load him on his horse and take him off somewhere where he can't be found. You stay there with him."

"Me?"

"Yeah."

"With the corpse?"

"Yeah. Don't show your ugly face around here till I come lookin' for you. Take him back to our last camp. That's a good place."

"What do I do—ride up to TF an' croak him, an' if they object, tell 'em to go make their beef to Sid Copelle?"

"You slay me, boy. He goes sparking every Sunday night in town. The best thing is to bush up somewhere along the way and let him have it when he goes by."

"Hell, you think I don't know nothin'?"

"Practically. Get outa here now."

Jangles walked halfway to his horse, a crowbait pony he hated to ride, and stopped again. "How about ridin' your horse?" he asked. "This old lunker went lame again last night an' he's apt to drop dead before I git halfway to that hole-up."

"All right, take him," Copelle flared. "Take him and clear out!"

WYAT MORGAN was on the lookout for stray riders, so he saw Jangles come down the slant out of the aspen hills. He recognized Copelle's horse, but he knew Copelle wasn't aboard. He trailed the rider

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for some distance, keeping out of sight, but he couldn't figure out what he was up to.

The ragamuffin rider slanted toward TF, but when he hit the TF road to town, he dog-legged it back, wasting a lot of time. It puzzled Morgan. The road was up and down like a washboard, across a rash of small hogbacks and gullies, and sometimes for five minutes at a time Morgan lost sight of the rider. Finally, he lost sight of him altogether and changed his tactics. Keeping his eye on an open space far ahead, which the rider couldn't as yet have passed, Morgan threw a wide circle, and then started working his way back.

It began to get dark, and he moved in closer to the road, but he couldn't locate horse or man. It made him edgy. This looked like a bushwhacker's trap, but a Sunday-night trap wasn't apt to catch many flies.

Then, all at once, he thought of Clew Bough, who was sparking Sue Lester, and always went to town on Sunday night. Maybe Clew was this ambusher's quarry. Without a gun, he wouldn't have a chance to defend himself. BAT would get the blame, and, adding it to what had happened in the afternoon, they would all turn blind to reason, and even Toller Bough's bone-deep fear, and Boone Taunt's, too, couldn't stop the black smoulder from bursting into wild flame.

He saw clearly now that this valley would never find peace, because it was built on fear, and fear begot fear until at last it exploded of its own poison fester. The surface wounds might heal, but underneath the fester would remain and finally destroy them all, including his own Triangle M place.

Buffer range wasn't the answer to their troubles. There was an answer somewhere, and Morgan was willing to bet his bottom dollar that, in the end, it would resolve itself into a question of right or wrong. Most things did. And when Bough and Taunt both came to see what they were groping for, he was convinced that BAT and TF on-a-Rail would stand together.

In the meantime, he had to find his own answer to this bushwhacker's trap. He could warn Clew to ride around it, but it wasn't the answer he wanted. He wanted to stop Copelle in his tracks, here and now.

The vague outline of a plan began to simmer around in his mind. He rode back to the mouth of the cut, gnawing at that idea in his mind until, by the time Clew showed up, he had made something of it.

"I got a hunch there's trouble up ahead, Clew," he stated quietly. "I don't know what it adds up to, but I want to go see. Let me take your horse, and you wait here. Don't augur about it. Just step down, and—"

"What kind of trouble?"

"I don't know exactly, Clew. Just step down. It won't take long."

"But I got a—"

"Don't augur."

Clew shrugged and slid down. He rode a stiff-jointed paint horse, a relic of his boyhood days that ought to have been turned out to pasture long ago, but he still used it to go to town. "Don't try to get any speed out of him," he warned with half a grin.

Morgan shook his head. "I'll call you if I want you," he said, mounting. "Otherwise wait right here."

The road ahead was soft and dusty, muffling the sound of the horse's hoofs. Morgan got out his gun, holding it handily between his legs. The best cover lay on the left, and he raked it thoroughly as he went by, but saw nothing.

A faint prickle raced up and down his back. It was darker than he had anticipated. Brush crowded close to the road, and twigs brushed his boots. A night bird swooped down and away in erratic flight. Somewhere far-off a hound bayed. Something moved alongside the road, but before he got past it he knew it was only a rock. Once, the paint pricked up its ears and almost came to a halt, but Morgan kept it going.

A small sound, strange to nature, caught his ear, a sound so small an unlistening man wouldn't have heard it. But it hit Wyatt Morgan like the roar of a cannon, because he knew it was the sound of a gun coming to cock.

He wasn't sure what happened next, whether he started to go overboard first, or whether he first saw the flash of gun-flame lashing out of the brush. At any rate, he hit the ground before the bullet could reach him, and his own first shot brought results.

The bushwhacker let out a strangled

yelp and raised a wild commotion in the brush, threshing and stumbling and floundering until a man would have thought he had flushed a bunch of cattle. Morgan crouched on the far side of the road, waiting. Clew's paint stood frozen, the habit of standing ground-tied too strong to break. All at once, the bushwhacker exploded out of the brush and floundered across the road.

Morgan lifted his gun, but he didn't fire. It wasn't necessary. Before the bushwhacker got halfway across the road, his knees buckled and he went down on all fours. Morgan saw he was hardly more than a boy, but he was savage as a cornered animal. His head came up, and he showed his teeth in a twisted snarl, trying to say something. Then his arms buckled and he flattened out in the dust.

"Oh, Clew," Morgan called, "come on in."

CHAPTER

4

Satan's Play

The next morning Toller Bough called Wyatt Morgan into his office. Willy Tilt was there with his arm in a sling and a black scowl on his face. Toller said he had sent Nancy for Boone Taunt so they could have a quiet reasonable talk about this new development.

"What new development?" Morgan asked.

"The fight over on your place yesterday," Bough told him, sighing deeply.

"Oh, that," Morgan said. "I almost forgot."

"I wish we all could," Bough answered.

"So do I," Willy added, looking down at his arm. "Personally, I think you're crazy, boss, sending Nancy over there. It wouldn't surprise me any if them buzzards took a crack at her."

"I couldn't send anybody else, that's sure," Bough stated. "I know she'll be safe."

"You could've sent Morgan," Tilt said pointedly. "He gets along fine with BAT—just fine."

"He's in a different position with BAT than the rest of us," Bough pointed out.

"I should say so," Willy Tilt agreed.

"What's this about Urk, Wyatt?" Bough asked. "Willy says you claim to know

for sure that BAT didn't shoot him."

"That's right."

"Well, how do you know?"

"For the time being, Toller, I'd like to have you take my word for it."

Toller Bough pursed his lips. "Well, yes, I guess that's good enough for me. I'm sure we can settle this with Boone Taunt."

Willy Tilt gave them both a disgusted look. "I only work here," he muttered. "So did Urk. I didn't cotton to him no-how, but I'll stand by him, war or no war. That's more than I can say for either of you. Dammit, you'd call black white just to keep things lookin' nice! Morgan don't know any more about it than I do. He claimed to, so he could bust up that fight, that's all. Busted my arm, too."

"I'm sorry about it, Willy," Morgan said. "You should've—"

"Don't tell me what I should've done," Willy broke in. "I know."

"That's enough of that kind of talk, Willy," Bough stated. "Morgan did right, and if you can't see it that way I'm afraid I'll have to let you go. You know what I've told you time and again. I can't have any hot-heads roaming around stirring up trouble."

"All right, go ahead and fire me. I'm fed to the teeth with this place, anyway. You don't catch me tuckin' my tail between my legs an' runnin' for a fraid-hole every-time BAT says 'Boo'. You can talk with Taunt all you damn please an' smooth it all over so it all looks purty again, but you can't talk a dead man back to life."

Bough flushed under the tirade. "We've had bad times here, Willy," he said. "We don't want them again."

"You'll get them good an' proper if you keep on craw-fishin' all your life."

At any rate, Morgan thought, *Willy sees it the same way I do. Only I've got an ace in the hole, and he's adrift.*

Toller Bough was running out of patience waiting for Boone Taunt, and looked around for something to sputter about. "Since when have you taken to wearing a gun again, Wyatt?" he inquired irritably.

"I never left off," Morgan answered mildly.

"I don't know why you do it. Taunt and I don't. There ought to be a law against—" He broke off suddenly and came to the

window. "Is that Taunt riding up now?"

"No," Morgan said, his blood suddenly racing. "I think that's somebody to see me. I'll be back."

He got up and went outside, and he was standing by the corral gate when Sid Copelle rode up. Copelle was riding a lame old crowbait, but it didn't seem to bother his vanity any. The usual wry knowing grin was on his face.

"You're just the man I want to see," he said. "I've been lookin' over your Triangle M place, an' I figure I could do something with it. I want to buy you out."

"Hadn't figured on selling," Morgan remarked.

Copelle looked around. "Got a place we can talk an' do business?" he asked.

MORGAN shrugged and led the way to the empty bunkhouse. When they were inside, Copelle showed his hand.

"Don't get the idea that I'm that piddling Ute Urk. He showed me a good thing, that's all, an' I'm takin' it over. That's why I played it that way up there at the Falls. You didn't have me bamboozled for a minute."

"That's what I sort of figured after I got my wits back," Morgan confessed. "Who gave you the notion that I would sell my place?"

"I just dug it up," Copelle said. "I thought I could persuade you."

"You don't look like a man who would have the cash."

"I don't happen to need it."

"No?"

Copelle shook his head. "No. Let me ask you this—how much is Clew Bough worth?"

Morgan grinned mirthlessly. "Never thought much of it. Why?"

"Because I got him for sale. Your place for him."

"I don't get it," Morgan said, but he was getting it fast.

"Clew Bough ain't around, is he?"

"Why, no," Morgan admitted. "He didn't get back from town last night."

"Ain't anybody worried?"

"No. He sometimes stays there overnight."

"He didn't last night. He never got there. I grabbed him and it'll cost you the Triangle M to get him back."

"You're pretty damned brassy," Morgan remarked. "Damned if I hadn't ought to pop you."

Copelle threw a leg over the arm of his chair and let it dangle indolently. "Nobody hardly ever tries. When they do, they hardly ever get away with it. Besides, if I didn't show up at a certain place at a certain time, Clew Bough wouldn't like what he would get. That's the way I've got 'er made. Now you sign this law paper turning Triangle M over to me, an' everything'll be okay."

"BAT and TF wouldn't stand for it. I—"

"I've got all that worked out, friend. Sign up. Then we'll go over to tell Bough the good news."

Morgan made all the motions of trying to get out of it. He was playing for time and he raised a hundred objections, but Copelle had an answer for all of them. Finally, Nancy and Boone Taunt rode into the yard. Taunt went inside, and Nancy rode off again. This was what Morgan had been waiting for.

"I reckon you got me," he said, gloomily. "I'll sign that damned paper."

"I'm glad Taunt showed up," Copelle said. "Now I can kill two birds with one stone. Let's go over an' tell 'em the good news."

"What about Clew?" Morgan asked, leading the way to the house.

"You don't need to worry about him."

If this was to be a peace talk between Toller Bough and Boone Taunt, they obviously had gotten off to a bad start. Willy Tilt, apparently, had been giving Taunt a piece of his mind, and Toller Bough had ordered Willy out of the room. Morgan met him at the door and said:

"Cool off, Willy, you're carrying too big a load."

"Oh, shut up," Willy muttered, and stamped out.

Toller Bough gave Copelle an irritated look. "I think we ought to finish this business first, Wyat, if you don't mind," he said pointedly.

"This is Sid Copelle," Morgan announced. "I just sold him the Triangle M, so he's an interested party."

Bough and Taunt both looked stunned.

"Sorry," Morgan muttered. "I was pushed into it."

Copelle sat down, cool as brass. "I would hardly say 'pushed,' Morgan," he remarked. "At any rate, here's my bill of sale, and all I ask is to be let alone. That ain't too much, I reckon?"

"But—but—" Toller began.

"There's one other thing," Copelle broke in. "Triangle M wasn't big enough for Morgan an' it ain't big enough for me. I figure I ought to have a mile off each of you to give me room both ways."

Toller Bough's jaw dropped. Boone Taunt got up. "I take offense at this, Toller," he spoke up, starting for the door. "Don't ask me to come here again. You made some kind of arrangement with this man without—"

"Sit down," Copelle ordered bluntly. "If you don't, you'll be wishin' you had. I don't fool around."

Boone Taunt hesitated a moment, his face bleak and white; then he came back.

Copelle turned to Toller Bough. "Your boy, Clew, didn't get back from town last night, you know that?"

Toller Bough gave him a puzzled look. "Why, yes, I know that," he answered stiffly. "He stays over once in a while."

"This time he'll stay a long time. He's dead."

TOLLER BOUGH came up out of his seat, his usually ruddy face white. Then he sagged down again and mumbled, "I don't believe a word of it."

"I reckon you will in time," Copelle said.

"The man's crazy," Boone Taunt snapped.

"Like a fox," Copelle admitted. "Remember, I only said he was dead. I didn't say who did it. Not yet." He gave Taunt a cool sardonic look, as pointed as anything he might have said.

Boone Taunt got up again. "This is impossible."

"For Lord's sake, sit down," Toller Bough begged. "What's the rest of it?"

"I saw him shot, gents," Copelle claimed baldly, "and I can name names, if it comes to that. But I ain't interested in stirring up a rumpus. All I want is some elbow room."

Toller Bough suddenly jumped to his feet and grabbed Copelle by the shoulder. "Speak up," he rasped in a rough choked

voice. "We'll hear the rest of it right now!"

Copelle shook him off with an angry gesture. "Keep your hands off me," he muttered. Then he cooled off again and went on. "You know, bushwhackin' is gettin' to be quite a popular sport around here. First there's Humley, then Urk, and now Clew Bough. Them things don't just happen, unless you want to look at it that way."

"We've looked at it that way long enough," Toller Bough muttered.

"The two of you are too damned yaller to look at it any other way," Copelle jeered coolly. "That's why I can stand here an' tell you I want more room. And I want it on black and white. I've got you over a barrel, and it'll cost you a mile to get off. Talk turkey, Toller, or I'll throw BAT against you. You, too, Taunt, or you'll get the same. One peep to a jigger like Tilt'll do it, either way. You both know it, so get busy."

"That's one kind of peep you won't ever make, Copelle," Morgan spoke up for the first time. "Look outside here." He tapped his fingernail on the window.

Nancy had come back, back from the line shack where Wyat Morgan had sent her to fetch her brother, Clew. In spite of Copelle's claim that he had seen the shooting, Clew was far from dead. He was riding his own paint horse, and Jangles, tied hand and foot, sat aboard a lead horse, his long black hair flopping around his face like wilted grass. His shoulder was bandaged and he favored it considerably when he moved, but it didn't look as if the wound he had gotten would be fatal. Morgan waved through the window, and Nancy waved back.

Toller Bough mumbled something in his throat and ran outside. Taunt followed.

"They'll get it straight now," Morgan remarked, side-stepping away from the window. "You've played your hand, Copelle. It went bad on you."

Copelle moved back. "Damn you," he scolded, as if it were some mild prank Morgan had played on him, "you fixed me good, didn't you?"

"Good enough," Morgan agreed.

"Why didn't you speak up? No use lettin' me make a fool of myself."

"I knew it would take a lot of rope to hang you, Copelle. And I wanted Bough

and Taunt to get a good look at you and your ways so they would know what they let themselves in for. I reckon they know now."

"That damn Jangles," Copelle muttered. "I s'pose he spilled his guts."

"Good an' proper. He ain't as tough as he puts on."

"I never liked that kid. I knew he would be the death of me sometime."

"You've got that straight, all right."

Copelle moved across the room. He had come to, the last frayed end of the rope Morgan had fed him, and there was only one move left to make.

Morgan knew what it was. Copelle could still get out of this with a whole skin. No one out there in the yard had a weapon, and Copelle knew it. If he could get past Morgan, he could climb a good horse and ride. This talk of his wasn't half as mild as it sounded. It made good cover for this next move.

"It beats me," he muttered dolefully, heading for a chair as if he meant to sit down. But before he sat down, he suddenly came alive and whipped around. His gun flamed through the cool dark gloom, and Morgan's barked back at him. The window went to pieces, and glass spattered across the floor.

Copelle, badly jarred, sat down. The only reason he had missed his first shot was because he had made a fix on the spot where Morgan was standing before he turned his back, but Morgan had moved in the meantime. Copelle's gun roared again, but he didn't manage it any better than the first try. The bullet gouged the ceiling, and he roared his outrage.

Morgan's second shot jarred him again. "Damn you," Copelle roared. "You tryin' to stitch me to this sofa? Let me up."

"Get up."

Copelle tipped forward and came out of the chair. He almost went on his nose, but he hit a wall before he fell, and he braced himself against it and came stumbling across the floor straight at Morgan, his gun flaming. Morgan tried to stop him. He emptied his gun, and so did Copelle. Morgan stepped aside to avoid a collision. Then Copelle crashed into a wall again and sank to the floor in a dead heap.

Morgan tried to reach a chair, but he couldn't make it. He saw blood seeping

down his shirt front, and his knees began to buckle. He saw Nancy come in the door, but she was too late to reach him before he crashed to the floor.

MORGAN didn't try to count the days, but he knew when it was Sunday morning again by the sound of the off-key hymn-singing coming through the open window of his bed-room in the TF ranch house. And, a little later, he heard Willy Tilt drone through something that brought a mild laugh from everybody.

Willy was saying that the BAT boys had consoled him about his busted arm, and the way they crowded around him he thought they wanted to bust the other one, and he had gotten real nasty about it and told them all to go to hell.

"Well, I don't reckon they'll follow your advice," Toller Bough said. "I think you can let it go. It ain't words that count, anyhow—it's the spirit."

"Well, I got no end of that," Willy said.

"I think we all have," Toller Bough said earnestly.

"I'm sorry I shot off my mouth so big and loud in all directions," Willy went on. "I've apologized to Wyatt for the different things I called him, an' I reckon he took it the way it was meant."

"I don't have any doubt at all," Toller Bough agreed. His earnest groping voice held them. "Boone Taunt and I have been making medicine most of the week, and we see things we didn't see before. This coming week we're going to start on some buildings on the Triangle M. Taunt is sending over five of his men to help, and I'm sending five of you to match it, so the place ought to be ready by the time Wyatt gets back on his feet. We have also decided to slice off a mile of range on each side and turn it over to Triangle M so he'll have a sizable place. I guess that's all. Clew and I are going to BAT for dinner, so I ain't got much time. I only want to say you can build a big hell out of a few small mistakes, and vice versa. Nobody has the time to mistrust an honest man. That's what I've been so all-fired busy doin', I ain't took time to look at things that needed more doing."

"That brings up this new kid," Willy stated. "He sticks around here as if he's wanted, and I understand he's the orneriest

kind of a buzzard there is. What are we going to do about him?"

"He asked me if he could stay," Toller stated. "He ain't as mean as he tried to be, an' now that he's got a haircut he looks better, too. Not charming, but passable. He says he likes you boys, an' if you find it possible, I'd like to have you return the compliment."

This was blunt talk, with Jangles sitting right there to hear it.

"I'll take him up," Willy offered, after brief consideration. "I'll speak to Tip Humley about him, too, so he don't try to shoot him."

Jangles' head went down and he smeared a fist across his eyes.

"You reckon you can be a man?" Willy went on.

"I can try," Jangles answered him with reasonable humility. "I reckon I'll need some help."

Wyat Morgan smiled at the ceiling. He recalled how a week ago Ute Urk had shamed Clew Bough with his ridicule, and it occurred to him that the real reason behind it was that there was something to be a little ashamed of. Toller Bough, because of his fears, hadn't stood honest and forthright before them, but now he was doing just that, and Wyat dared to think it would be a long day before Clew Bough, with his clear-seeing eyes, would have any

reason to feel ashamed of his father's actions again.

Morgan wondered what had become of the letter Copelle had gotten from him at the Falls, and what he had meant to do with it if he had lived to carry out his schemes. Ute Urk had been tricky with those letters, trying to keep himself in the clear, but it hadn't worked, and it had worked no better for Copelle.

Trying to figure out the whys and wherefores of these things put Morgan into a doze, and when he woke again, Nancy Bough stood beside him with a dinner tray, loaded double.

"We're here alone today," she told him, "so I thought I would eat with you. You look pert."

"So do you." She cut his meat, and tucked a napkin around his chin.

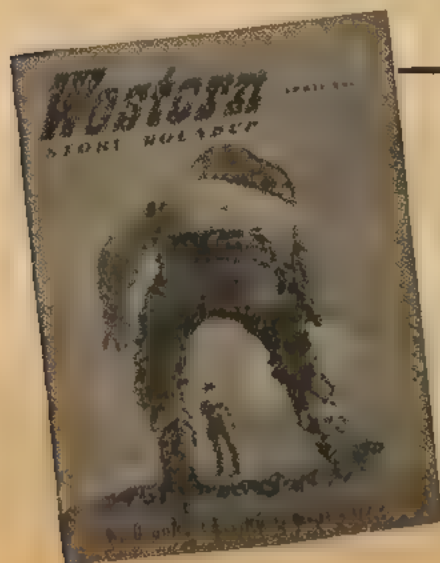
He heard her hand rasp over his crop of whiskers.

"Nancy, I wonder if you would mind shaving me sometime today?" he asked her. "I must look like sin."

"You don't know what you're asking," she answered. "I never did anything like shaving a man before. I might cut your throat."

"From you, Nancy," he told her, taking her hand in his, and letting his words stand for all she meant to him, "it would be a treat."

THE END



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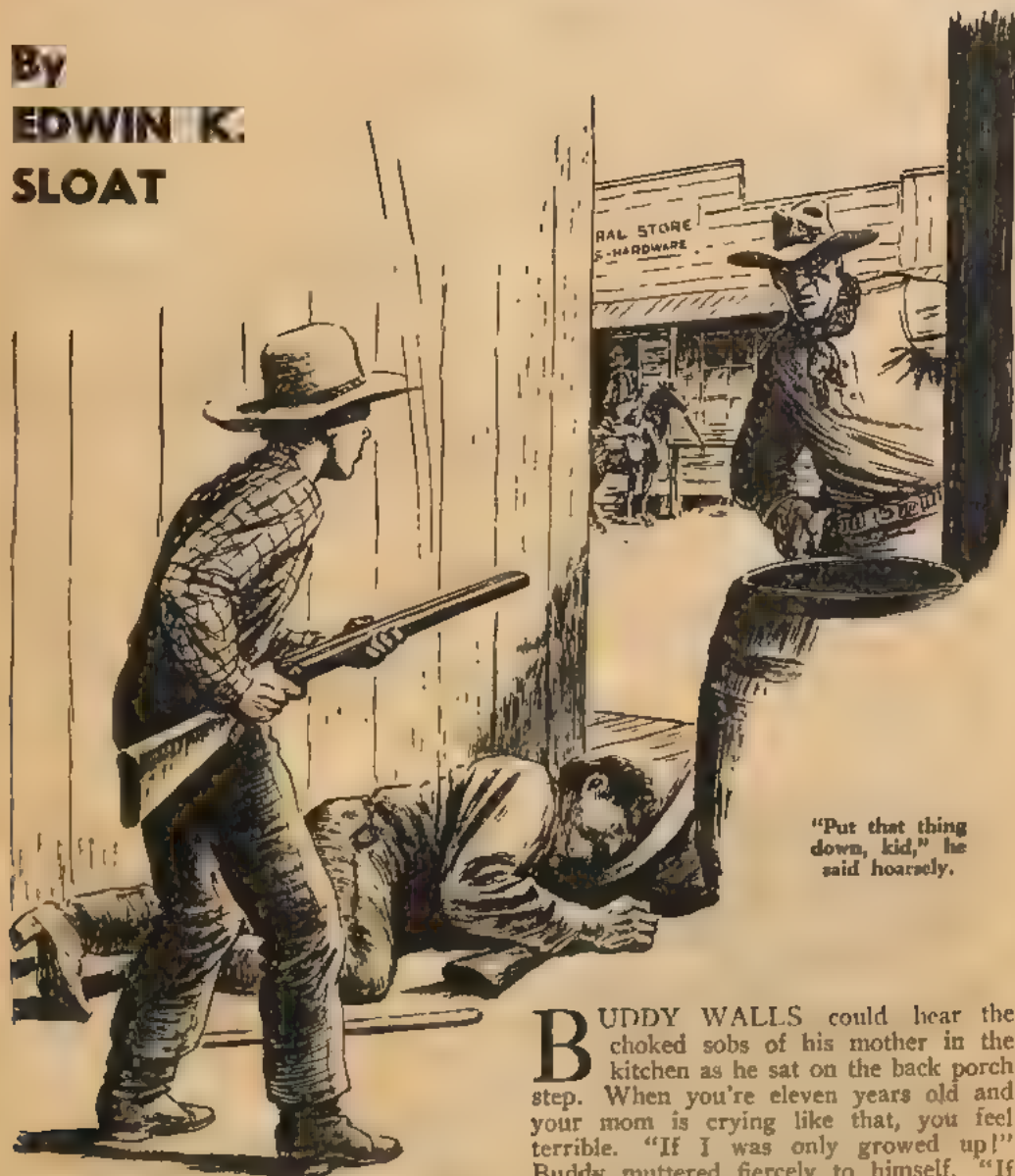
Folks who figured Buddy's dad for a corpse come sundown—didn't guess a younker's courage could shrink a fearsome gunslick down to . . .

SHOOTIN' SIZE

By

EDWIN K.

SLOAT



B UDDY WALLS could hear the choked sobs of his mother in the kitchen as he sat on the back porch step. When you're eleven years old and your mom is crying like that, you feel terrible. "If I was only grewed up!" Buddy muttered fiercely to himself. "If I was only just grewed up!"

The front screen door slammed, and instantly Mrs. Walls' choked sobbing stopped. Buddy could hear his dad coming



back through the living room to the kitchen, his feet sounding heavy and tired. The footsteps halted and there was silence, and Buddy knew that his dad had paused in the kitchen doorway and Mom was looking at him and waiting for him to speak. That's the way he did when he came home and she was waiting to find out something.

"It's not true is it, Tom?" she asked finally. "The governor wouldn't dare pardon Drag Lasher, would he? Drag Lasher has shot down a dozen men in cold blood—he's robbed banks and stolen cattle! The governor couldn't possibly pardon anyone like him, could he, Tom?"

"I'm afraid the governor did, Mary," he answered wearily. "His brother, Jeb, the fat one who cleans out the loading pens at the depot, came into the store to tell me that Drag is free and that he'll be in on the train this afternoon."

"Let's go away, Tom!" She sounded hysterical. "Let's be gone when he gets here. We can start over somewhere else—some place where people won't know us. You owe it to me, Tom; you owe it to Buddy. We both need you."

"I can't go, Mary," he said drearily. "It's something you can't run away from. Drag Lasher would just follow us, and it would be the same thing over again. Besides, our home is here, our business, and our friends. I knew this would happen if Drag ever got out of prison. I knew it when I testified against him and the judge sent him away for life. Whoever would have dreamed that the governor would give the Garrott Bunch a blanket pardon, including Drag Lasher?"

She gave a despairing cry.

"And now he's on his way back here to Locust Bend to kill you, just like he swore he would," she sobbed. "And you think you've got to let him call you out and be murdered. Oh, Tom, it's not fair!"

There was a silence, broken only by her sobs. Then he spoke gently:

"I've got to go back to the store now, Mary. Better have him come there than here."

Buddy got up silently from the porch step and slipped away from the house. "If I was only grown up!" he told himself over and over.

But deep inside him he knew that it

wouldn't make any difference if he was grown up; he could never be as fast with a six-shooter as Drag Lasher was. No-boy in the world was that fast, not even Buddy's dad, who was pretty good or he couldn't have served as a deputy for Sheriff McAbee for five years before he bought the general store.

Something had to be done. Some way, somehow Drag Lasher had to be stopped. The thought churned around ceaselessly in Buddy's mind, producing wild, impossible schemes that brought groans when he saw how futile they were.

Presently he looked up and saw that he was but a few yards from the rear entrance to his dad's store. Then he was aware that he was hearing the whistle of the approaching train. Drag Lasher was arriving! He'd be bound to come directly to the store from the depot.

Buddy lunged forward, jerked open the screen door and ducked into the store. It was empty. He knew that his dad had gone out in front under the wooden awning to wait for Drag Lasher. Buddy looked about wildly and his eye fell on the sawed-off shotgun that stood beside the desk in the corner. It was the gun his dad had carried while he was deputy and it was always loaded.

The boy picked it up swiftly and crept to the front end of the store, where he crouched beside the screen door and tried to stifle the mad pounding of his heart.

HIS DAD stood outside, leaning with folded arms against the awning post. He wore no gun. Buddy lifted his head an inch or two so that he could see through the window beside the door.

Drag Lasher was coming down the street.

Men stood in groups along the walk, silent and staring, and a tight breathless hush hung over everything so that every little sound carried loud and plain.

Drag Lasher came up to the store in reckless, powerful strides. But his famous gun with the twelve notches in its black walnut handle was missing from the greased holster.

Drag planted himself on the sidewalk six feet from Tom Walls, who still leaned against the awning post with his arms folded.

"I've come back," said Drag Lasher harshly. "I'm back to scotch me a human snake by the name of Walls, and I'm going to do it right. That's why I ain't wearing my gun—yet."

"Nobody wears a gun in Locust Bend these days," said Tom Walls quietly. "Locust Bend became peaceful and law-abiding after the Garrott Bunch went to prison."

"Well, it ain't peaceful no more, damn you!" bellowed Drag Lasher. "I'm back! You hear me, you dirty son? Drag Lasher is back just like he swore he'd be, and he's going to run you out of this stinkin' burg! He's going to run you clear out of this country—clear off the face of the earth. And if you look back, he's going to gun you down just like he would any other polecat. But he's going to do it all legal-like. There ain't going to nobody say that Drag Lasher is a skunk like you are. So you've got till sundown to get out of town. If you ain't gone when the sun touches them hills yonder, I'm coming down this street looking for you."

"I'll be waiting for you," said Tom Walls evenly.

Drag whirled around and tramped back up the street. Tom Walls still leaned against the awning post and watched him go. The silent staring groups of men along the street burst into excited talk.

Inside the store Buddy eased out his constricted breath and felt the cold sweat trickling down his neck. His dad was safe. For a little while, anyway. Then Buddy looked down at the sawed-off shotgun in his sweaty hands, and suddenly he knew what he had to do.

He had to kill Drag Lasher before Drag Lasher came back down the street at sunset and killed his dad. Buddy's mouth went dry at the thought, but he knew inside him that it would have to be done because there was no other way out.

He sneaked swiftly back through the store lest his dad see him. He knew what would happen if his dad found out. He'd take away the gun and lock Buddy in the storeroom till it was over.

Beside the back screen door Buddy paused. He wouldn't dare go prowling around carrying the shotgun like this. Then he saw an empty gunnysack on the floor nearby. He thrust the gun into it and left

the store with the sack under his arm.

He hurried now, glancing desperately at the sun rolling down toward the blue line of hills to the west. There wasn't much time.

There were only half dozen punchers in the Paradise Saloon talking about the coming shoot-out when Buddy peeked in at the rear window. Drag Lasher wasn't among them. He wasn't in the barber shop either.

Maybe he had gone to the hotel to lie down till it was time to go down the street. Gunmen sometimes did that. But when Buddy sneaked up beside the hotel, he saw Clark, the fat proprietor, sitting there in his old chair, blocking the entrance. While Buddy was wondering if he could get in the back way and look through the rooms, Ed Rung, the banker, came up to the hotel porch.

"Did Drag Lasher rent a room from you?" Rung asked.

"I'll say he didn't," retorted Clark grimly. "And he ain't goin' to either. Say, can't we do something to stop this business? Somebody ought to make Tom Walls get out of town while he can."

"I tried to this morning," said the banker. "He says it would just be putting off the showdown, so he's going to see it out here. We've sent for Sheriff McAbee. He and his deputy are both over in the hills looking for missing beef. Even if they get here, it won't do much good. They'll just jail Drag for disturbing the peace and run him out of town. Just like Tom says, it'll only be putting off the evil day."

BUDDY sneaked back along the side of the hotel out of hearing. Panic threatened him now, and he gripped the shrouded shotgun desperately. Drag had to be somewhere. Maybe he was over at Wing Fo's restaurant getting something to eat.

Buddy stared at the shabby little false-front with Wing Fo's sign on it across the street and listened to the banging of pots and pans and the shrill voice of Wing Fo scolding his help. There was a narrow opening between the restaurant and the empty building next to it, a narrow passageway crowded with empty boxes and open swill barrels clouded with flies where Wing Fo dumped his garbage. There would be

a good chance to get a look into the restaurant through the grease-blurred window at the front end of this passage.

Then Buddy remembered Jeb, Drag's brother. Drag had probably gone to the loading pens to see him.

Buddy ran now, but when he neared the depot he slowed to a cautious walk. Presently he heard voices and eased up close to the pens, his hand inside the gunnysack so that his fingers lay against both triggers of the cocked gun.

He heard Drag speaking in an undertone. "You got it straight now, Jeb?"

"I guess so," Jeb answered a little uncertainly. "You want me to wait in that passage beside Wing Fo's with the saddle gun you had me hide there and plug Tom Walls when he comes up the street to meet you. But somebody will hear the shot and I'll get caught, won't I?"

"Not with all the pots and pans banging around inside the restaurant. That saddle gun don't make much noise either. Besides, I'll be shooting, too, and nobody will be listening for an extra gun. Now have you got it straight?"

"Yeah, I reckon. But, Drag, why do I have to shoot him? You're greased lightning with a six-shooter. Tom Walls can't hold a candle to you."

"Listen, you dumb ox," growled Drag. "It's just like I got done telling you. There was a fight in the rock quarry at the pen and some dirty rat hit me on the shoulder with a rock. I can't drag iron like I used to. My shoulder is numb and the medico says it always will be. I'm slow."

"You're still faster than Tom Walls, I bet."

"Maybe I am," snarled Drag. "But I get spooked when I think about my shoulder. I can't shoot straight when I'm like that."

"Then why don't you forget about it?" Jeb argued. "I don't want to shoot Tom Walls. He never did nothing to me—aw!"

Buddy could hear the boards rattle as Drag shook Jeb's fat body.

"You listen to me," panted Drag. "You'll go through with this, or I'll kill you! I made my brags about what I'm going to do to Tom Walls and I'm going to do it, see? You get over to Wing Fo's

and get yourself planted with that saddle gun in the passage. I'll go to the hotel and start down the street from there. I'll be smoking a cigarette. Tom Walls will come up the street to meet me. His kind always does. When I throw my smoke away, that's your signal to down him. For the last time, do you understand?"

"Yeah, I get it," answered Jeb. "Only don't choke me no more. I can't hardly swallow now."

Buddy heard them leave the other side of the pens. He saw Drag separate from his brother at the depot and start down the street while Jeb took a course behind the falsefronts which screened him from the street. Buddy trailed Jeb and saw him vanish into the opening between Wing Fo's and the vacant building.

Buddy ran, clutching the gun inside the gunnysack. When he reached the back of the restaurant, he halted and peeped past the corner into the passage.

Jeb was leaning over and fumbling behind the first swill barrel for the carbine.

Buddy glanced over his shoulder. The glowing orange ball of the sun was still a few minutes above the rim of the hills. Whatever he could do had to be done now.

At his feet lay a broken broom handle that had been thrown away by Wing Fo. Buddy laid the shotgun on the ground, gripped the broom handle in both hands and cat-footed forward. Jeb began to straighten up. Buddy struck down with all his slight strength. The broom handle broke across Jeb's skull and dropped him face down without a sound.

There was no time to wonder if Jeb was dead. Drag's harsh voice was speaking inside the restaurant.

"Forget the coffee. I got me a snake to scotch and I can't wait."

BUDDY stepped back and caught up the shotgun from the ground. He slid it out of the gunnysack as the front door slammed. Above the shrill, scolding voice of Wing Fo he heard Drag speaking softly from the front corner of the building beside the passageway.

"I'm going up to the hotel now and get started, Jeb. When I throw my smoke away, you shoot him. Understand?"

Buddy's heart began to hammer against

his ribs and his breath choked in his throat. Frenziedly he jerked up the shotgun and cooked back both hammers.

"You hear me, Jeb?" Drag's voice was a trifle louder and tense with sudden anxiety. "Where are you, Jeb?"

Drag stepped into view and stared wildly at the white-faced boy crouching beside Jeb's sprawling body, the sawed-off shotgun in his hands aimed at Drag's chest.

Color drained from Drag's pock-marked face, leaving it a putty gray.

"Put that thing down, kid," he said hoarsely. "Turn it the other way."

"I'm Tom Walls' boy," said Buddy through clenched teeth. "And I ain't turning it the other way."

Drag's putty face faded to a sickly white.

"Aw, forget it, kid," he whined. "I changed my mind. Honest. I ain't going to tangle with your old man. Put that gun down."

Buddy stared at him and saw the true Drag Lasher; not the fearless, daring gunman so many people pictured him, but a cowardly murderer who would face a man only when he was sure that the odds were all in his favor. And with an understanding beyond his years, Buddy saw something else.

He saw that this thing must be carried out to its bitter end now, whatever it might be, because it was not his place to deal with Drag Lasher. His dad must do that. When a man called you out, you couldn't let your little son take over the task of dealing with him. You had to do that yourself.

It was all different now since Buddy knew about Drag's injured shoulder. That made the odds about even. Drag might be faster on the draw, but he might also get spooked. The shoot-out would have to go through.

Buddy's face went a shade whiter as he made his decision and he hunched down a bit more over the shotgun.

"You're going down the street, Drag, just like you've told everybody you would," he said through stiff lips. "You called my dad out, and now you're going to face him on your own. If you try to stop or duck out of it, I'll let you have both barrels in the back, and they're loaded double with buckshot. Now go on."

Drag's pocked features twisted in despair. He started to speak, but looked at Buddy's set white face and blazing eyes, then jerked himself around and started down the street.

A hundred yards away the tall figure of Tom Walls left the awning in front of his store, moved out into the center of the street, and came unhurriedly to meet him.

The sun was no longer in Tom Walls' eyes. Its great, glowing orb had plunged below the rim of the distant hills and the long shadows had vanished from the hushed empty street and buildings that hid a hundred pairs of watching eyes.

Buddy fought down a wild surge of panic. It was all he could do to keep from calling out, to try to halt the nearing violence. Maybe his dad couldn't match Drag Lasher's famous gun at all. Buddy shut his eyes tight.

Abruptly the falsefronts shuddered from the crash of gunfire. A great shout arose. Buddy forced himself to open his eyes.

His dad stood in the middle of the street looking down at the sprawling body of Drag Lasher in the dust. People were running to him and were shaking his hand and pounding him on the back.

Buddy eased down the hammers of the shotgun and got weakly to his feet. As he staggered back out of the passageway, he looked back. Jeb Lasher was sitting up and rubbing the knot on his head dazedly, unaware that Buddy was anywhere around.

It was no trick to reach the back end of the store unnoticed and put the gun in its customary corner. He could hear his dad in front now under the awning and the excited crowd with him. Buddy didn't want to see him nor anyone else. He just wanted to get away by himself and think things over.

"There's just one thing, men," said Tom Walls to the crowd. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk about this in front of my son, Buddy. After all, he's just a boy. There'll be time enough to talk when he grows up."

Buddy slipped out of the back door and started for home. *Dad's wrong*, he thought. *I was a boy this morning. How awful long ago that was!*

MOUNTAIN BLOOD RUNS HOT!

The posse was loose in the hills, putting Jim astraddle of a dilemma—with all his dreams on one side . . . and his kin on the other.



He reached for the rifle. . . .

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

JIM GODFREY was putting new wire up for his calf pasture when he saw the posse come up the mountain trail about an hour before sundown, moving rapidly against the bank of storm clouds rising in the northwest. The posse did not stop at Jim's cabin, but kept push-

ing up the trail and quickly disappeared into the woods.

The clouds boiled up darker, and there was the smell of rain in the air. Godfrey dropped his fencing gear and rode into the creek bottoms, where he pushed his small herd out of the low ground and onto the

higher land. Storms in these mountains brought flash floods of water that swept down the creeks in solid walls, carrying everything loose before it.

Driving his cows before him, Godfrey ran into the posse coming back down the main trail. Sheriff Rudd Hartley broke away from the group of armed horsemen and joined Godfrey. Jim pulled up to see what his friend wanted.

Hartley said, "Howdy, Jim."

Godfrey did not ask the officer who he had been looking for. He knew they had not found their man, but he was mountain born and mountain trained, and mountain men were a silent breed who grew up to look upon the law as a natural enemy. The sight of a posse chasing mountain men in these hills was not an unusual experience to him.

"Ain't seen anything of your Uncle Jake, have you, Jim?"

That was the way with Hartley, getting down to business with a sometimes uncomfortable directness.

"No. Haven't seen him," Jim answered. He felt a distinct unease at the searching glance the sheriff gave him. Hartley knew as well as he did that old Jake was serving twenty years in prison for killing a posseman in the same battle in which Jim's father and brothers had died. That battle had made mountain history.

Then another thought gave Godfrey a premonition of trouble. Hartley wasn't asking that question just to remind him of his family. There was a reason for the question, and Jim suspected that he knew what it was. Hartley's next words justified his suspicion.

"Jake broke out of Granite Prison a couple of days ago," Hartley said. "Him and Lige Cracken. We know they got this far. They were seen and recognized around Moberly's ranch last night. This morning two of Moberly's horses and saddles were gone. We trailed them up the mountain road this far, and then lost them up in the rockbeds. We found Moberly's horses that they abandoned. I figured they was trying to get here to your place to hole up."

Now the familiar old bitterness was stirred up in Godfrey, a kind of free-floating resentment at a world in which he lived condemned because he bore the name of a tribe of mountaineers who had writ-

ten a sordid and bloody chapter in the history of these parts of Indian Territory. That chapter was closed now, but the people down in town had a way of keeping it fresh in Jim's mind:

"No, Jake hasn't been here," Godfrey answered.

"They killed a guard making their escape," Hartley continued. "Stabbed him in the back."

"I haven't seen him," Jim repeated.

Hartley sat his horse, thinking in silence for awhile. Then coming to a decision, he said, "All right, Jim. You know, of course, that it's a criminal offense to harbor a wanted man."

He tightened his reins to ride on, then changed his mind and stopped again. "I'll tell you, Jim. Jake is your uncle and all that, but he's bad medicine. He can only get you into trouble. I'd give it considerable thought before I let him drag me into his business."

"If he's around here, I don't know about it," Jim answered with a rising impatience.

"All right," Hartley answered.

The officer rode on to join the tired posse. Dusk was settling fast, and the thunder and lightning were rising swiftly. The posse had been in a hurry to get out of the hills.

GODFREY watched the sheriff's back until he was out of sight, then finished driving his cows into the high pasture. He went up to the house to cook his supper, hoping that the sheriff had been wrong, and knowing that he had told the truth.

The knowledge that his uncle was hiding here somewhere in the mountains brought back to Godfrey all the old haunting worry which had filled his youth. It had always been like this; one of his relatives dodging the law, the rest of them lying to cover the fugitive. He had been taught that the law was his natural enemy, just as the hound was the natural enemy of the deer.

But Rudd Hartley did not appear to be the enemy that he had come to believe lawmen were. Jim had come to know Hartley pretty well in these recent years, and Hartley had been of a lot of help to him in various ways. Hartley had come as near to being a friend as any man he had ever known.

And now Jake was here, and Hartley was

hunting him. Jim Godfrey felt like a man caught in the middle of a gunbattle. It was not his affair, but he would be hurt.

Jim went out to his smokehouse and got down a side of home-cured bacon and brought in a bucket of home-grown potatoes. He started slicing bacon and peeling potatoes while the fire in the kitchen stove got hot and the coffee water boiled.

Jake would be hungry. He would expect food and help. Mountain men were a tight clan, and it was bred in them to help their own in times of trouble. It had to be that way, for they had no other friends. He sliced off extra bacon, peeled more potatoes, put more water and grounds in the coffee pot.

But he was troubled now, more troubled than he had ever been. Hartley had helped him, giving him work on his own ranch at haying time, giving him odd tools off the big stock farm that he ran down at the foot of the mountain. He had given him five pigs once when the sow died, and Jim had fed them by hand and raised them, and they were the foundation of his hog stock now running in the woods. Much of the beginnings of his small stock farm could be credited to the sheriff's help. Hartley—and only Hartley—had treated him like a human being.

It was a little while after dark when the supper was ready and he sat down to eat. Now there were lighting flashes overhead, lighting up the banks of clouds pouring over the mountaintops. The thunder had built up from a rumbling low in the distance to sharp overhead explosions which rolled and echoed off the mountainsides.

Then came the voice he had been bracing himself for, a cautious, suspicious call from outside the kitchen door.

"Hello."

Natural caution made Jim blow out the light and reach for his rifle in the corner before he went to the door and answered the call.

"Who is it?"

"That you, Jim?"

"Yes."

"This is Jake, your Uncle Jake. I want to come in. I got a friend with me."

"All right. Come on," Jim answered, and threw the bar off the door.

A flash of lightning gave him a momentary glimpse of the two lean, bedraggled

men who stepped into the cabin. Then he closed the door behind them and barred it with its two-by-four board.

"Jim, put something over that window before you turn the light on, will you?"

Jim groped for a quilt off his bunk and put it over the window. There were still nails on the window frame, put there by his father, who had blacked out the same window more than once. Then he relit the lamp.

The yellow glow of the light revealed Jake Godfrey in all his worthlessness, the lean, bearded face, the shifty, red-rimmed eyes and the tight-lipped, bitter mouth. His clothes were wet and smeared with mud, and his shoes were covered with the black muck of the sloughs and creekbanks. And the man standing with him, also past middle age, was completely like him in appearance and nervous restlessness.

Jake studied Jim, whom he had not seen in seven years.

"Boy, you've growed up. Regular man now, ain't you?"

Jim had no answer for this. "You want something to eat?" he returned.

"We sure do," Jake answered. "Jim, this is Lige Cracken. He's a friend of mine. Came from over on the next ridge. As good a feller as you ever wanted to meet. The salt of the earth."

Jim nodded his head and said, "Sit down and eat."

HE GOT two extra tin plates and cups from the box nailed on the wall, and dumped bacon and potatoes into them from the skillet, and poured them coffee. The two men sat down with their hats on and began wolfing their food noisily.

"Heard you was doin' right well for yourself," Jake said. "Bill Rawling, that they sent down to Granite last year, was telling me. I always knew you was a smart boy. Only trouble, you was kinda queer, different from your brothers. Never knew exactly what was wrong with you, though."

Jim could have told him. He had wanted something which he could not rightly describe, but which he strongly felt. He had wanted freedom, an outward freedom and particularly an inner freedom. He wanted to move about without a haunting fear clutching at him always, as it had al-

ways hovered about the men of his family.

These things he did not explain to Jake, who would not have understood. Perhaps he could not have explained them to himself any too clearly.

"What are you doing around here?" he asked, to change the subject.

Jake looked at him queerly.

"What do you reckon we're doing here?" he answered. "We had to go somewhere. We broke out of Granite. Hartley got on our trail today, and we had to ditch our horses. Me and Lige had to kill a guard to get out, and we ain't fixing to go back and face that. We can hide around here till we get fresh horses, and then get going. There's a gold strike up around Morton's Gulch, I hear, and we'll be sittin' pretty when we get there."

Drygulching prospectors, Jim thought. Jake would never change.

"You ought to know they'd come here looking for you. The sheriff and posse were by here already. He was asking about you."

The lean old man grinned. "Don't I know it?" he answered. "And didn't I know that this storm turned 'em back? I ain't lived around here for nothing."

"What are you figuring on doing?"

"I ain't fool enough to hang around here, Jim. I just stopped here to get some things, and then we're going to put the creek between us and the sheriff. When this rain hits, the creek will be out of its banks in an hour. And nobody can get across it for three or four days. We'll be out of the country by then."

"It's a long walk to the creek in a rain-storm. You shouldn't have left your horses."

"I know it. But we had to do it to throw the posse off. We rode 'em up to the point where the creek runs through the rockbeds, then chased the horses on into the woods. Then we dived off the rockbeds into the creek and floated back downstream. Kinda doubled back on Hartley, and lost him."

The two men crammed their food into their mouths with their knives for awhile. Then Jake said, "We can take them horses of yours. And you might get us a side of bacon to take along."

"You can have some bacon, but I need

those horses," Jim answered. "It'll be corn-planting time when this rain's over, and I've got plowing to do."

"But we need 'em!" Old Jake argued. "We got to keep moving." He spoke as though that settled the matter.

Jim felt the anger building up in him. "You'll just have to walk it, I can't spare those horses. I need 'em, myself."

"Yeah, but you ain't running from the law. We are."

That was the way it always had been with his relatives. They were always running from the law.

"I can't help it," Jim answered shortly. "You can't take 'em."

Jake set his coffee cup down, and stared at Jim in what was intended to be surprise.

"Don't you know you're goin' against your own kin?" he demanded. "No Godfrey ever done that. We stick together, Your pappy taught you that."

"He taught me a lot of things," Jim answered tightly. "Things that didn't do him or anybody any good."

Jake shook his head disgustedly. "You sure are a queer one. And you gone plumb crazy since your pappy ain't here no more to learn you things."

Then he returned to his eating, silent and thoughtful.

AFTER a while he turned to Lige Cracken. "That just shows you how blood will tell on a man. No Godfrey would turn his back on his own blood. But this here boy ain't a real Godfrey. My brother and his wife took him in to raise when he was just a baby. He was the son of a couple of people that lived down in town. Blacksmith and his wife that was drowned up here when they got caught in one of these spring flash floods. The Godfreys raised him, and now he lets 'em down in their time of need. Ain't that gratitude, for you?"

Lige Cracken had a mouthful of bacon, and he made no comment. Jake Godfrey turned his attention back to his food, and the silence in the room was broken only by the sounds of their ravenous eating.

Jim Godfrey heard Jake's talk and was torn between hope and disbelief. Jake, he knew, would say anything that suited his purpose. Jim remained silent not wanting to reveal the things in his mind.

Outside, the sharp crackling explosions of thunder spilt the clouds and dumped the first torrent of rain on the mountains. Jim got up and busied himself cleaning up the tin dishes while the other two men sat and smoked.

And then after a while, Jake said, "Lige, I reckon we'd better be going. We don't want to get caught on this side of the creek, and that creek rises mighty fast once it sets in raining further up in the mountains."

Lige mashed his cigarette out, and Jake shoved his bench back. He went to the door and looked out. Then he stepped back, and with a smooth, quick movement he started toward Jim's rifle which was leaning in the corner.

Jim saw the movement and interpreted it. He dropped the frying pan and dived for the gun. Lige Cracken stuck one of his long legs out from his bench and tripped him. Jim slid across the board floors, his hands stopping within two feet of his rifle.

Jake got his hands on the gun first. Jim, lying flat on the floor, caught Jake's ankle and upset him with a hard upward jerk. It dropped Jake to his back, but he was still clinging to the gun.

Jim grabbed for the weapon and got hold of it, but Jake wrenched it out of his hand. Then Jake got up onto his knees, lifted the rifle and slashed Jim across the head with the barrel of the gun.

Jim saw a blinding flash of light; then everything went dark to him, and he sank back unconscious on the floor.

Jake got to his feet, his face tight.

"He always was a queer one. Maybe that'll teach him. Get a side o' bacon out of that smoke house, Lige, and let's get them horses and get going before the creek rises."

He found shells for the gun in the box nailed on the wall, and stuffed them into his pocket. Then, plundering through the box, he found a roll of currency and some silver in an old baking powder can with a yellow label on it. He looked triumphantly at Lige and shoved the money into his pocket.

Lige said, "Won't he hold it against you?"

"What of it?" Jake returned. "Like I said, he ain't a real Godfrey. And since

he ain't even acting like one, it ain't nothing to me what he does."

He dropped the empty baking powder can on the table, and the two men went out into the night, carrying the rifle. They stopped at the smoke house and got a side of bacon down from the rafter, then went on to the lot to get the horses.

The rain was falling heavily now.

"We better hurry," Luke said. "That creek will already be rising higher up the slope."

* * *

When Jim came to his senses, he heard the rain still beating steadily on the house. His head ached, and when he touched the sore spot, his hand came away covered with blood. Sitting on the floor, he looked stupidly at the bloody hand, and his anger at Jake sat down deep in him and burned.

He got to his feet and looked around the cabin. His rifle was gone. Then his eyes fell on the baking powder can on the table, and he knew that Jake had taken the money he had been saving to carry him through until he got his crop in. His jaws clamped tightly, and he knew that there was hardly any use to even go out to the barnlot to look for his horses.

But he found his lantern and lit it. He put on his hat and slicker against the rain and stepped out of his back door.

A voice came from beside him, just outside the doorstep.

"All right, Jim. Hold it a minute. I want to look around for Jake and his friend."

It was the voice of Rudd Hartley, and there was no anger in it, but merely the firmness of a man with a tough job to do, and who would do it.

There was something in the scene which brought back other such scenes out of his past. It brought back all the old suspicion of the law which had been trained into him throughout his youth. And he reacted with a quick rage. Hartley was going to make trouble for him—and he wouldn't stand for it.

It was an instinctive and a defensive act when he swung the lantern around and caught the surprised Hartley on the side of the head with it. Hartley stumbled against the house and his gun went off. His feet slipped in the mud and he fell to

the ground. His head hit a rock and he lay still.

AS QUICK as the rage came to Godfrey, it fled even more quickly. He realized that he had hit the one man in the outside world who had shown any interest in him at all.

After all, Hartley was only doing his duty. He was only representing people who felt toward Jake and his kind in the same way that he, himself, felt. He was sorry he had hit the sheriff.

He stooped over and lifted Hartley by his shoulders and dragged him inside the house. He picked Hartley's gun up out of the mud and brought it inside and laid it on the table. Then he got water and bathed Hartley's head, and soon had him revived.

As he watched the sheriff regain his senses, he felt his vague anxiety turn into a real concrete fear. By thus hampering the sheriff, he had been actually guilty of aiding and abetting Jake and Lige in escaping.

Hartley sat up on the edge of the bed and studied him with a queer look. He looked at his gun on the table. Then he asked a question.

"What did you do that for, Jim?"

Jim Godfrey took a deep breath; as a man might make an effort to pull himself together in order to walk from his cell to the gallows. He picked up Hartley's gun by its barrel and went over and handed it to him butt first.

"I don't think I can tell you so you'll understand. It was something out of the past, maybe like an animal develops his instinct when it is young, so that it can avoid danger. That's the best I can explain it to you. I wasn't trying to keep you from looking for Jake. I reckon I did wrong, but there wasn't anything personal in it. And now, if you feel like moving, I'll take you to where Jake and Lige Cracken are hiding."

"Kind of going against your own kin, ain't you?" Hartley asked.

"Maybe I am and maybe I'm not," Jim answered. "Say! You've been around here a long time. Did you ever hear of a blacksmith and his wife that got drowned around here, say about twenty-five years or so ago?"

"Sure," Hartley answered. "Ed Bridgewater and his wife. His wife was my wife's sister. What's that got to do with Jake Godfrey?"

Jim told the sheriff about Jake's appearance, and his demand for horses, and then repeated what Jake had said about Jim not being a real Godfrey. "I thought he just lying to Cracken because I didn't want to give him my horses," he finished.

The sheriff stared at Jim as Jim told the story, and when he was through with it, the sheriff was silent for a long moment. Finally he spoke.

"That was a queer thing," he said. "Jake Godfrey's brother owed Ed Bridgewater for a team of horses, and Ed came up here either to collect or get his horses back. He took his wife and young son along. They were going to do some fishing after he got his business done. The storm came up while they were gone, and we figured they were all drowned. Godfrey claimed they never went to his place. A party of us came up and worked the creek bank. We found the buggy, and the bodies of his buggy horses down below here, and also found Ed's body and his wife's body. We had always figured that the kid was drowned, too, and his body washed on downstream somewhere. Godfrey could have killed your parents to keep from paying for that team. But we'll never know."

Hartley examined Jim closely, then said, "You could be Ed Bridgewater's son, all right. You look a whole lot like him, now that I study you."

"I guess we'll never know for sure," Jim answered. "But I'd like to believe it."

"And I think you'd be safe in believing it," Hartley answered.

Jim got to his feet with a new spring in his step. "We'd better be going if we expect to get across the creek before the rise," he said.

Hartley wiped the mud off his gun and checked it, then got to his feet. Jim went to a box in the corner of his room and got out an old gun and holster that had been there since the man he had believed to be his father had been killed.

"We'll go by the lot and see if my horses are there, but I reckon they took 'em. I'll have to ride double with you."

They went out into the rain that was a steady downpour now, and found the

a crash while the horse was still ten feet from the far end.

The bridge shivered and gave way at the middle with a rending noise, the water sweeping the separated parts downstream like double doors opening wide. The sound of splintered timber filled the darkness as the bridge crumbled and sank, tearing loose from the banks.

The horse lost his footing and went down into the water that was engulfing them. Then both riders and the horse were struggling in the boiling stream. Jim lost his flashlight as he grabbed for a piece of timber and missed it.

The water carried him downstream in a mad rush, tossing him about like a floating fence post rushing down the mountainside. After a while he felt a sudden jolt. Something like half a dozen fists hit him, and he found himself caught in the limbs of a tree which had fallen over into the water. The tree was still rooted in the earth on the bank, and Jim fought against the current, finally dragging himself along the tree trunk. He reached the bank, dripping and bruised.

His slicker was no use to him now, and he took it off and hung it on a bush. Then he worked his way back upstream in the darkness and rain, shouting for Hartley. He finally got an answer nearly a quarter of a mile up from where he had emerged. Then he located Hartley by the sound of his voice.

He stopped at the water's edge and called out, "Where are you?"

"Out here in the creek, hanging onto a limb of that leaning willow. My arm's broke, or something," Hartley's voice came over the sound of the driving rain.

WITHOUT matches or a flashlight, it took Godfrey nearly a quarter of an hour to find a pole long enough to reach out and allow Hartley to grasp it. Then he hauled the sheriff to the bank and dragged him out of the water. The overhanging limbs of the willow had saved him.

The sheriff's left arm hung limp. "I got tangled in the wreck of the bridge," he explained. "I don't know whether my arm is broke or not, but it hurts like hell. I wonder where we could go to get out of this rain?"

"Jake will be holed up in a cave about a

mile from here until this rain is over," Jim said. "It's dry in there, and we can wait there for daylight."

He could not see Hartley in the dark, but after a moment's silence, the sheriff said thoughtfully, "You don't give up very easy, do you?"

"You want those men and I want my horses, don't we?" Jim countered. "You ready to go?"

"I lost my gun in the water. Could I use yours?" Hartley asked.

"I lost mine, too. But that doesn't matter. They've only got one rifle between them. Come on."

They made their slow way the remainder of the distance, helped by the lightning flashes and Jim's intimate knowledge of every rock and tree on the mountainside. They came at last to a growth of buckbrush in front of a flat wall of sandstone.

By a lightning flash, Hartley saw the layout. "I never would have found this place"

"A lot of mountain people already know you couldn't," Jim answered dryly. "You'd better stay out here. I'll go in and get 'em."

Then by the next flash of lightning, Hartley saw Jim pick up a smooth round rock the size of an apple. Jim started through the brush. Hartley, ignoring his advice, trailed along behind him as quietly as he could.

The cave entrance was behind a big clump of elderberry bushes and as they rounded the clump, they saw a dim small fire burning just inside the cave mouth, protected from the rain. Jake and Lige were on the far side of the fire, broiling slices of bacon on long, forked sticks.

Jim stepped up to the fire with the rock hidden in his hand. Jake saw him and dropped his broiling stick. He reached for the rifle beside him.

As his hand came up with the gun, Jim threw the rock. The stone hit Jake in the head just as the rifle exploded. Jake fell over backward and the single-shot weapon fell from his grasp. Jim hurdled the fire, followed by Hartley. Then Jim dived for Jake, and they were fighting on the ground.

Lige Cracken got hold of the rifle and tried to fire it hastily. It snapped on the

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Next

Published

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Issue

April 4th

Howdy, folks. . . If you like an exciting tale of gold and guns, we recommend Kenneth L. Sinclair's "Tyrant of Oro Grande." It tells the story of Mark Conway, hardrock miner and trouble-shooter, on a secret mission to Oro Grande to learn why the Shannon's fabulous goldmine was sending only a dribble of wealth to the dead partner's heirs.



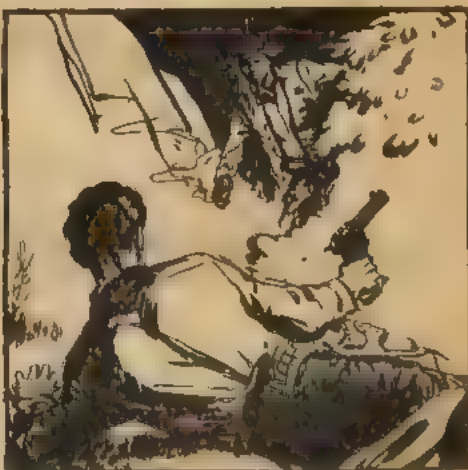
Mark had barely hit town when he was almost run down by Kitty Shannon's carriage. Proud, beautiful and dangerous to all men, Kitty ran both the mine and the town. Surprisingly, she soon made Mark manager of the mine.



If Kitty was doing any high-grading, Mark knew he'd find the evidence in Vern Sny's isolated retort shack. He braced Sny at night, determined to beat the truth out of him. Before he could, a bushwhack shot dropped Sny.



When Sny died in Doc Beale's office, Mark was in a tight, for the enraged miners thought he was the killer. The unpredictable Kitty held the mob off, then supplied a horse so Mark could escape to the hills.



Mark outrode the miners but not Kitty's cowboys. Exhausted by his long ride, he holed up and waited for the showdown with Ben Lake, ramrod and his bitter enemy. . . . The complete story will appear in the next issue.

SATAN'S MAN FRIDAY

By HAL HAMMOND



He hit Jergens solidly before the big man had a chance to get himself set.

When common decency to your friends marks you for boothill, Cliff figured—it's pure pleasure to take a bully-boy along.

THE bulky figure of the man slouching against the hitching post quickened Cliff Boyle's interest and brought to him a feeling of unrest and disquiet. Lobo Jergens always affected him that way. There had never been an open break between the two, but the mutual feeling of animosity was there, the line separating them from open conflict thin and brittle as glass.

Jergens gave his cigarette an impatient toss as the hardware man approached. His narrow eyes were emerald-green, cold and

hard as he stared at Cliff Boyle's sandy-colored hair from which one curly lock fell rebelliously over his tanned forehead.

The freighter was irritated about something. It showed in his flinty eyes. It exploded from between his thick lips in whistling, gusty words.

"Still the little tin hero, ain't you?"

Cliff Boyle considered this thoughtfully. Knowing Jergens, he could guess what he meant. Jergens had tried to court Mary before she married Ira Walker.

"You know Mary needs a job now that Ira's lost a leg," Boyle said, trying to be patient, trying to get through the freighter's stubbornness. "There ain't any other jobs in Castle Butte that she can handle. I need help in my store. Just because you didn't get her don't give you no right to keep wearing a grudge."

"You don't need help in your two-bit store any more than I need camels on my freight line," Jergens stated flatly. "I'm tellin' you to leave the Walkers alone. Send Mary home where she belongs." The last word was like the flat slap of a beaver's tail on water.

A slow flush darkened Boyle's face. "Ira needs help. There's doctors bills to pay. They'd starve if Mary didn't have a job."

"Then let 'em," Jergens rapped back.

Boyle saw that the freighter's angry frustration was building to a head. If there had to be an understanding between them, they'd better have it now.

"Jergens," he said coldly, "what I do, as long as I'm within my rights, is my business. If Mary wants to work in my store, she'll work in my store. If I think anyone is trying to persuade her not to—I'll take the matter up personally."

Jergens stared at Boyle's light blue eyes with their disconcertingly cool expression.

"Don't forget I run the only freighting outfit in this town." Through his voice ran a throaty quiver of temper. "Think that over when you've got a new shipment of freight you want hauled. You get no more stuff freighted in by my outfit as long as Mary works for you."

Cliff Boyle ended the talk abruptly. "In that case I'll hire a team and haul it myself." He turned away, but not before he saw the look of hate in the freighter's green-colored eyes, a cold stare that promised trouble if he carried out his promise.

CLIFF BOYLE continued down the street, walking with a loose-jointed stride that still showed the years he had spent in the saddle. Ahead the street fell away and he had to walk stiff-legged down the incline. The weathered buildings seemed to lean with the steepness of the hill, almost touching, as though depending on each other for support. There was hardly room between them for the spicy mountain air to filter through.

He continued down the street until he reached the edge of the town and stopped at a neat little log house. Without knocking, he opened the door and called out cheerily: "Howdy, Ira."

The man on the bed was pale and gaunt but his tired face wove itself into a smile when he saw his friend.

"Howdy, Cliff," he said. "Pull up a chair and chin awhile. Get's lonesome with Mary around here only at meal times an' in the evenin'. Not that I ain't glad she's got the job, though," he added hastily. "Don't know how we'd get along without it. It'll be a long time afore I can get back to work. Been here two weeks now, an' it seems like two months."

Cliff had been standing under the ladder watching Ira Walker paint when it had happened. Walker had gasped, sharp anguish and pain in the sound. For a second he had swayed, while the pail of white paint dropped from his fingers. The flat crack of a rifle had bored its way through the morning's quiet as the thin man on the ladder buckled in sections, like a stretched chain that is dropped, and fell limply to the ground, his kneecap shattered by the bullet.

"Just take it easy an' quit worrying," Cliff said, pulling his mind back to the present. "Thinks will work out all right."

"A one-legged man ain't of much use," Ira Walker answered him, the lines around his mouth deepening. "This is a tough country. You've got to be whole if you're goin' to make a livin'."

Cliff Boyle had an answer for that one. "When you're able to be up and around, you take Mary's place in my store."

Ira Walker's eyes showed his gratitude. For a moment he lay quiet, his thin hands laced together. Then they clenched, little blue-veined ridges standing out against their paleness.

"The gent that fired that shot aimed to

kill me. I hate to say it, but I'm afraid you'll get yourself in trouble by helpin' out me an' Mary."

Cliff Boyle thought of Lobo Jergens. He changed the subject.

"You know that puff of smoke I saw on the mountain side when you were shot? I've hunted that area over a dozen times but never found a trace of where the bushwhacker was hiding."

"I think I know who it is," Ira said softly. "Reckon you do too."

"Could be," Boyle answered, getting to his feet. "Give a killer enough rope and he'll hang himself, so somebody said." He smiled at the thin, sober-faced man before him. "Chin up, Ira. You've got to look on the best side of things—if not for yourself, then for Mary."

"You shoulda been a doc," Ira Walker answered. "You pep me up more'n old Doc Walker does."

Cliff Boyle left, then, going back up the street. His thoughts returned to a letter in his pocket which he had received that morning. It was a notice that he had a shipment of freight in the valley town of Deerskin. It looked like he would have to hire a team and haul it himself. He thought of what he'd told Ira, *Give a man enough rope, and he'll hang himself*, and he thought of Lobo Jergens, and of how easy it would be for the freighter to have him bushwhacked on that torturous mountain road.

The sum of his thinking didn't add up to a very pat hand. He shrugged and turned down a side street toward the livery stable.

TWO men were sitting by the stable. One had a star pinned on his vest. He was long and loose jointed, with gray hair a trifle lighter than his looping mustache. The other man was smaller. His chair was canted back against the barn on two legs, so that his short body was stretched out almost straight. He cocked open one sleepy eye.

"Funny how gents pop aroun' an' bother me jest when I get all settled for a snooze," he said.

Cliff grinned down at the recumbent figure.

"Ike Brady, if you was any lazier, I'd have to get the bellows from the blacksmith shop and pump air in and out of your lungs.

That is, if you was half as lazy as you pretend to be."

"Jest believe in takin' it easy when I get a chanct," Ike yawned, but his gray eyes twinkled. "Now take Jim, here," his arm described an arc that included Sheriff Jim Harper. "He an' me is pals. We don't believe in burnin' up a lot a energy when we don't have to."

Jim Harper grinned lazily, but he didn't say anything.

"What's on your mind?" Ike Brady asked.

"A team and wagon. Going to haul my own freight."

"You and Jergens have trouble?" Brady asked, laying a shrewd glance on his friend.

"Might call it that."

"Been expectin' it ever since you gave Mary that job. You're welcome to anythin' I got. Ain't forgot you grubstaked me three years ago when I hit this town broke." Rather awkwardly he got to his feet and went into the barn after a team.

"The road's awful narrow at Lizzard Pass," Ike Brady said with pretended casualness as he brought out the team and started hitching them to the wagon. "Long ways down to the bottom. Accident could happen easy."

Cliff Boyle walked over to help him. "I'll make out," he said, but he noticed that the air of lazy casualness had disappeared from both Ike Brady and Sheriff Harper. They looked a little restless, a little troubled.

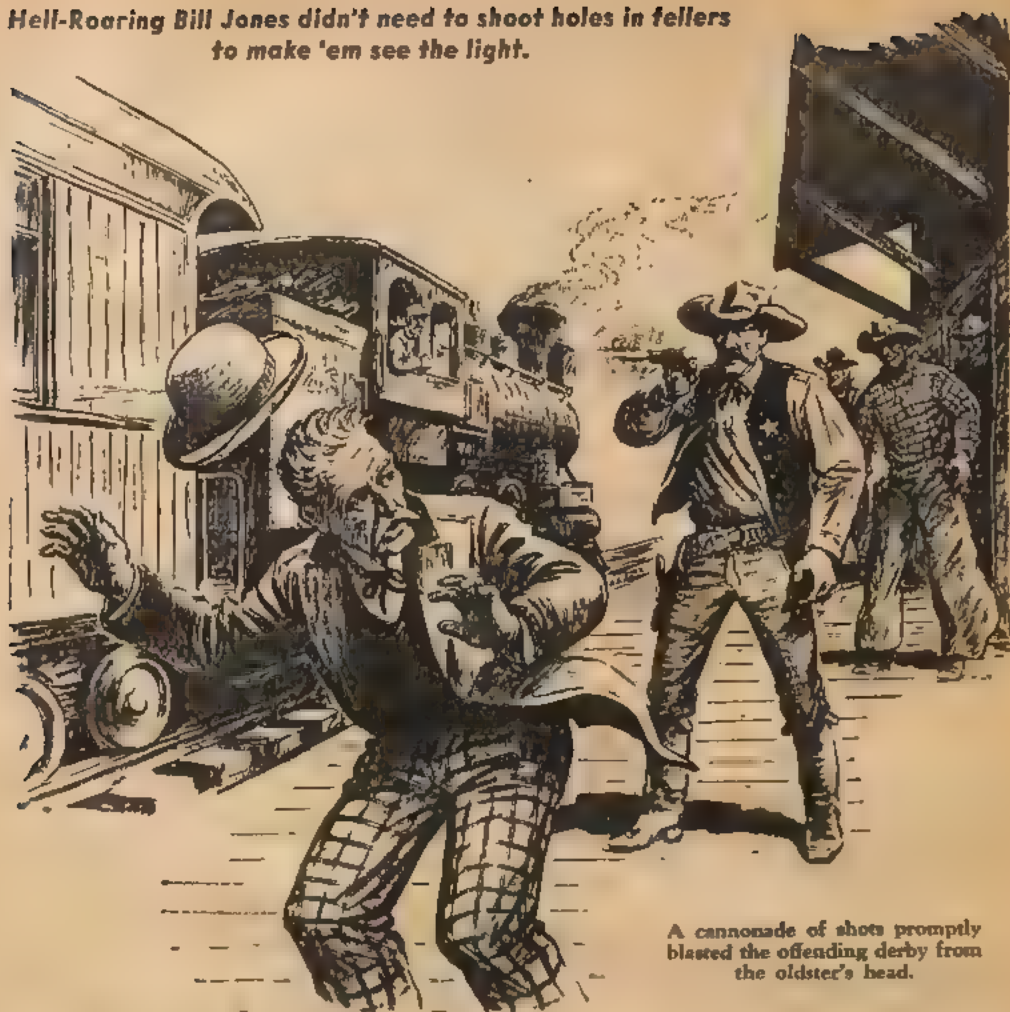
As Cliff Boyle mounted to the wagon seat and drove off, he saw Spade Nugget, one of Jergens' drivers, tooling his outfit into the livery stable yard. Nugget shot him a look of myopic interest as he drove by, flicked his glance away quickly. Cliff swore softly. He knew that Nugget would report what he had seen to his boss. . . .

Cliff Boyle was half-way back to Castle Butte, descending the gravel-ribboned, snaky road to the foot of Lizzard Pass. Far below him he could see Lizzard Creek, a thin, silvery splinter twisting erratically through the jagged folds of giant rocks.

As he descended, the road closed in until the wheels of the wagon rode the edge. On his right the mountain rose vertically for over a hundred feet, a solid wall of granite, darkly forbidding. To his left it sloped off steeply, loosely strewn with shale and

(Please continue on page 111)

**Hell-Roaring Bill Jones didn't need to shoot holes in fellers
to make 'em see the light.**



**A cannonade of shots promptly
blasted the offending derby from
the oldster's head.**

MAVERICK WITH A STAR

**By
BERNARD
KAAPCKE**

WILD BILL HICKOK and Buffalo Bill Cody had their points, but there was another Bill—"Hell-Roaring" Bill Jones, of the Dakota Badlands—who was their equal, perhaps not in deadliness, but certainly as a salty and colorful character. Yet he has received less than his just due of fame in Western annals.

Hell Roaring Bill was as handy with a six-shooter as the best of them. Perhaps it is a tribute to his skill that he never

had to use his weapon in a lethal way. Jones was a rough-and-ready lawman who believed in getting results in a more harmless and vastly more entertaining way. While Hell-Roaring Bill liked to run things, he did it in a way that left people's hides intact, though at times he shot holes in their dignity.

Some would have said Hell-Roaring Bill was officious. Others just put his acts down to ebullient high spirits. His first law job, as a constable in Bismarck, came to an abrupt termination when he attempted to correct the town mayor's behavior by rapping him over the head with his pistol-butt. The mayor, knowing Bill, did not object. The Bismarck chief of police, however, having no sense of humor, demanded Bill's resignation.

No whit abashed, Roaring Bill moved to another town, where he appointed himself a sort of exofficio guardian of the public manners and morals, of which he had his own peculiar conception.

The sight of a derby hat Roaring Bill especially regarded as a personal insult. Therefore, when a timid old gentleman wearing a wide-brimmed derby stepped down from the train for his first peep at the wild Dakota Territory, Bill let out an immediate howl of disgust. He drew his six-shooter with lightning speed and let forth a cannonade of shots which promptly blasted the offending derby from the oldest's gray head.

The old man fled in terror to regain the shelter of the coaches, scrambling back on board the train in fear of his life. The bullet-riddled headpiece he left lying on the platform where it had fallen. Roaring Bill still was not appeased. He ran forward, snatched up the derby and hurled it through the train window after the man, shouting, "Here, take the damned thing with you! We don't want it!"

Bill Jones' conscientiousness was rewarded by the citizens when they elected him sheriff of the county. How notable a sheriff he became may be judged by the fact that Teddy Roosevelt, a young man at that time, was happy to serve under him briefly as a deputy.

It was Roaring Bill, in fact, who really brought law to Medora, though this was while he was serving as a court bailiff.

The occasion was the trial of a notorious

rustler, who had finally been caught. The proceedings being the first attempt at formal justice in the region, the spectators and the cowpokes serving as jurymen all came dressed up in their Sunday best. But there was no courtroom, and no attorney for the accused, except for a disbarred lawyer who was not allowed to enter the presence of the judge. The trial was held in a schoolroom, with a neighboring saloon serving for a jury room.

Furthermore, the cowpoke jurymen's idea of the workings of justice was hazy, at best. But Roaring Bill, as bailiff, laid claim to an intimate knowledge of the law, and volunteered to take them in hand.

"I know you already settled on a verdict of guilty before you ever came in here," he told the assembled jurors. "But you got to sit here and listen."

THE judge was greatly impressed by the quiet attentiveness of the jurors. He and the prosecuting attorney delivered their most flowery and incomprehensible harangues, every word of which went over the heads of the cowhands.

Roaring Bill Jones thereupon led the twelve to the saloon to "deliberate." He bought them a round of drinks, ostensibly at the county's expense. The foreman then wanted to go back to the courtroom and finish it. But Roaring Bill said: "No!"

"You got to stay here at least a half hour," he said, "and make some bluff at chewing the rag. Otherwise the judge'll get the idea you don't know anything, which, by hell, you don't." To emphasize his point he dropped his hand to his gun.

So the twelve jurors stood at the bar and drank for half an hour. At the end of that time, their wits were even more muddled, and their speech none too certain. But Bill was careful to keep the foreman reasonably sober, enough so to answer a simple, "Yes," "No," and "Guilty."

Thus instructed, the cowpokes filed back into the courtroom to finish the ceremony. Before they could rush back to the bar, the judge treated them to an address congratulating them on their part in bringing "justice" to the Badlands. Nearby, with his hand still on his gun-butt to discourage any of the thirsty jurors from breaking out of his seat prematurely, stood Roaring Bill Jones.

LORE OF THE WEST

By JOSEPH W. QUINN

* Indian warriors advertised their courage by the size of their shields. The smaller his shield the more courageous the warrior proclaimed himself to be. Doubtless many a brave wished he hadn't advertised quite so extravagantly when an extra inch on his shield might have saved him from injury or death.

Contrary to common belief, Indians did not use grease for their war paints. Pigments obtained from soil and plants were mixed with water and applied to the face. The paint jobs were often symbolic, created fierce appearances. Perspiration or rain usually washed the paints into a meaningless mess. *

* Heaven help the cowboy who greeted a gal with "Hi, Nellie", unless Nellie happened to be her name. For Nellie was the well-known name for a skinny cow or steer that had managed to attain old age.

When the route of a trail drive took it through dry regions where fuel was sure to be hard to find, the chuck wagon was accompanied by a second wagon known as the "hooligan wagon." It was the exact counterpart of the chuck wagon, except that there was no chuck box. It was loaded exclusively with firewood and water. *

* On some trail drives a wagon was brought along on which to load calves born en route. No man wanted the job of driving the calf wagon, for with it went ceaseless ribbing from his fellow cowpokes and the monicker of, "Nursey."

The "jewelry chest" on a chuck wagon was the box up front where such things as extra bridles, bits, hobbles, pieces of rawhide (used for repairs) and other odds and ends were stored. *

* One of the chief causes of trouble between the cowboys and the farmers lay in the fact that trail herds would be driven across the farmer's property, ruining his crops. But there were times when the nester would plead with a trail boss to bed down his several thousand head of cattle on the farm land. If the trail boss complied, the farmer was the recipient of a free and extensive fertilizing job which saved him many hours of labor.

Thunder, lightning, gunfire, the approach of a buffalo herd or a band of horses were the most common causes of a stampede. But many a wild stampede got under way from such insignificant things as the flutter of a piece of paper, or a playing card waited on the breeze, or a rider's sneeze, or, at times, "for no doggone reason at all except just plain, ornery cussedness." *

FEUDISTS,

CHAPTER

1

No Man's Land

There was none of the usual celebration at the end of calf roundup on the Tolani range. Quarter horses and prize bucking animals remained forgotten in the remudas as the cold spring rain hissed dismally in the dying embers of the last

By
**CLIFF
FARRELL**



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Hair-Trigger Range Novelette

KEEP OUT!—————

Slim's gun thundered
twice.



His guns weren't for hire and neither was his favor—but it was like Slim Marlin to stand off a killer pack alone . . . to save the miserable neck of his lead-shattered rival!

branding fires in the shadow of House-rock Mesa.

Cowboys piled warsacks in the hoodlum wagons, and silently topped off for the home ranches. They did not fraternize as they followed the chuckwagons, which rolled away through the hubdeep gumbo.

Men watched each other narrowly from beneath sodden hatbrims. Two outfits, especially, kept apart. Only the presence in camp of Dave Breck, sheriff of the county, and three fighting deputies, had held the old feud between Milt Warnack and Jud Stottler in check.

That feud had lain dormant for years, but now it seethed close to the surface. Milt Warnack, owner of the big Sidewinder outfit, and his new range boss, Concho Jack Saunders, were more than ready for it. The ten riders they had brought to the roundup were mainly strangers in this range. They were fighting men.

Concho Jack, big, dark-complexioned, and handsome in a reckless, overbearing way, spat contemptuously in the direction of the Stottlers as he mounted and led his crew out of camp. Milt Warnack, stocky and stubborn, with a seamy, underslung jaw and cold, cloudy eyes, rode with them and did not deign a glance at his oldtime enemy.

Old Jud Stottler, brawny and shaggy in old chaps and a patched slicker that flapped open so that his brace of guns were within quick reach, waited until Warnack's Sidewinder crew was clear. Then he pointed his half dozen men in the opposite direction, toward their stamping grounds in Punchbowl Basin.

At Stottler's side were his two sons. Fat Stottler, the elder, was in his early thirties. He was blubbery and hell on a horse. Chad, the younger, was ferret-chinned and undersized. All had the same deep-set, button-black eyes that glittered from beneath thick, overhanging brows.

Among the last to pull out of the roundup camp was Slim Marlin, owner of the little Star Dot Ranch in the shadow of House-rock Mesa. Slim Marlin was lanky, with a bronzed, sun-puckered face and level, hazel eyes. He helped the two cowboys he had hired as they drove the last holdout of Star Dot cattle back to the home range. Like the sheriff, Slim was uneasy. Shadows ran over the square-hewn lines of his face.

Reaching his 'dobe ranch-shack at dusk, he paid off the two riders. They were tumbleweebers, who had drifted in for the roundup.

"I can chuckline you until beef roundup," he told them.

The cowboys quickly refused. As they rode away, heading for Showlow, they looked at each other. "The climate is goin' to be too hot in this range pretty soon, 'Shorty,'" one said. "I can smell gunsmoke right now."

"You can't be neutral when a range war busts," Shorty agreed. "Slim Marlin thinks so, but he'll learn different. Tough luck that he invested his stake in a little spread right between those two big outfits."

"He'll have to side in with Milt Warnack, Shorty. I heard that he aims to marry Warnack's daughter."

Shorty shrugged. "Looks to me like that Warnack gal hasn't made up her mind whether she likes Slim the best or that flannel-mouthed range boss, Concho Jack."

His companion swore. "Some day Slim Marlin an' Concho Jack are goin' to tangle. There's been a lot of good men rubbed out because a woman wouldn't make up her mind which one she wanted. Come on, fella. Stir up that crowbait. We'll have a drink in Showlow, an' drift outa this range before the guns begin talkin'."

BACK at his lonely ranch shack, Slim Marlin turned in early. He was dog-tired, but he didn't sleep any top well. He knew that Milt Warnack was counting on him to ride against the Stottlers when this old feud flared up. The fuse was laid, awaiting the spark.

Slim had nothing in common with the Stottlers. Old Jud Stottler was scornful of the rights of the small spreads. Slim had struck some friction with him over line fences and water rights. Milt Warnack knew this, and figured Slim would jump at the chance to help run the Stottlers out of the Tolani range. In fact, Warnack had hinted that Slim would get a good slice of Punchbowl Basin, once the Stottlers were smashed.

"I'll give you a weddin' stake," Warnack had said with a wink. "Bein' the owner of a real cow spread instead of a shoestring like you got now won't hurt your chances with any gal."

Slim thought of Yvonne Warnack, with her pert little mouth, her blue eyes and bubbling vivacity. He would give plenty to bring her here as his bride. Then he thought of Concho Jack Saunders and the gunmen Yvonne's father had hired, and his frown came back. It was plain that Milt Warnack was trying to force trouble with the Stottlers.

Slim couldn't understand or sympathize with that. Warnack owned the biggest ranch on the range and had more money than he could ever use. Jud Stottler was well-fixed, too. Still, they envied each other, coveted each other's range. Greed was the real basis of this ugly tension, though men talked vaguely of some old forgotten grudge of the past.

Slim had heard that Warnack was none too tolerant of the rights of small ranchers. Like Stottler, he held the old cattle king's attitude that grubstake cowmen were no better than squatters. Slim had fought through one range war, when he was no more than a button. That was in the Pecos Valley in New Mexico. He had come to Texas in the hope of finding peace, but it seemed he'd never find it.

He set his jaw grimly. "Let 'em fight," he muttered. "I'm staying out of it—come hell an' blizzard!"

He was up at dawn. He shaved, bathed, and put on his best Sunday black pants and a clean white shirt. He greased his boots, and trimmed the rough off his dark brown hair with shears. He had bills to pay in town and a grub sack to fill—and it was likely he might see Yvonne Warnack in Showlow.

As he turned into Showlow's muddy main street, the gathering clouds of range warfare gave forth their first lightning. A crowd of men had surged from a bar-room half a block away. Concho Jack Saunders led them. The big, black-haired range boss was dragging a smaller figure by the collar of a duck jumper.

Concho Jack swung a fist into the face of his prey, knocking the little man into the mud. Then he jerked his victim to his feet and smashed him mercilessly again and again.

Concho Jack's victim was Chad Stottler, the little, ferret-featured, skulking son of Jud Stottler. Chad was trying to fight back, his sharp teeth bared in a snarl of fear, but

he was helpless as a rabbit in Concho Jack's powerful hands.

"You slimey snake," Concho Jack snarled, "Jerk a knife on me, will yuh? I'll make you sorry you was ever born!"

Slim had dismounted. Now he burst through the silent crowd with a growl of protest. His fingers closed on Concho Jack's right arm, halting a blow that might have killed young Stottler.

Concho Jack, over-balanced, reeled back, and Slim moved in between them. Chad Stottler sagged to his knees in the mud, whimpering.

"You've had your fun, Saunders," Slim said. "That's enough. Do you want to murder him?"

Concho Jack's gun was in a half-breed holster, whanged low to his thigh. He poised, his dark eyes hot with fury. He seemed on the point of drawing.

Slim's long body settled instantly, and his tanned hand swung out above his holster. For an instant no man moved.

CONCHO JACK suddenly appeared to think better of it. He straightened slowly, his hand moving carefully away from his gun.

"So you sidin' in with them scabby Stottlers?" he spat.

"No," Slim said coldly. "But he's only half your size, an' no match even for a jack-rabbit."

"Maybe you figure you're my size," Concho Jack snarled. "If so, shed yore gun, Marlin. I don't like that way you barged in on me, an' I don't like the cut of yore jaw, or the shape of yore nose. I could alter 'em plenty, an' enjoy the job."

Slim shrugged. "I was doing you a favor, Saunders—keeping you from killing a man who couldn't defend himself. I don't hone for trouble, but if you want it that way—"

Milt Warnack came pushing through and stood between them. "Forget it, boys," he said gruffly. "Shake hands an' call it quits. We're all on the same side of the fence, an' we can't go fightin' among ourselves. Comb down yore fur, Concho. You'll have plenty of scrappin' without takin' on yore own friends."

Concho Jack looked at his boss, shrugged and turned away sullenly. But he did not offer to shake hands with Slim.

"The drinks are on me, boys," he

growled, "Come on, let's get goin'."

Slim boosted Chad Stottler onto his horse. "This is a good time to drift, fella," he told Stottler.

The groggy cowboy rode away. He looked back as he reached the end of the street, and shouted a threat.

Milt Warnack frowned at Slim. "That little whelp come here lookin' for trouble," he growled. "He knows he ain't welcome in Showlow, no more'n my riders are in Red Ledge. He passed some talk about me. Concho took it up. The snake tried to knife Concho. He only got what was comin'."

Slim watched Chad Stottler dwindle down the trail toward Houserock Mesa. "He will be on the pop when Jud Stottler sees Chad's face," he observed grimly.

Milt Warnack smiled coldly. "Let it pop," he nodded. "I'm all ready."

Slim looked around. The range had poured into Showlow to shop and gossip, now that calf branding was cleaned up. But ranchers were suddenly pulling out early. Women were hastily completing their shopping and climbing into buckboards and mud-spattered democrat buggies. Men were tightening cinches and mounting. There was a worried silence along the street. The spark had been touched to the fuse of range war, and every man and woman in the Tolani country knew it.

Slim turned away. "Where you goin'?" Warnack asked quickly.

"Aim to buy a grub pile an' head back to the ranch," Slim said flatly.

Warnack's eyes hardened. "You better stick around. We're holdin' a palaver in Big Ed's saloon. I want you in on it."

"Nothing I'd say would count," Slim shrugged.

Milt Warnack's underslung jaw began to jut. "Yvonne will be in town soon," he said significantly. "Better say howdy to her."

Slim turned away, fighting back a sudden gust of contempt. Was Warnack using his daughter as a club to drive him into this war?

A delapidated dead-axle wagon, with rusty bows and a mildewed canvas top, stood at the rail. The bones of the ancient team of buckskins showed through wrinkled hide. The horses and the wagon had been over long, hard trails.

Andy Lemon, bald and dour, was weighing out flour and beans for two customers. At first glance Slim thought both were boys, but as his eyes tuned to the musty dimness of the store, he saw that one was a girl. She wore old jeans, clean but faded and threadbare. The jeans overlapped at the back under her leather belt. Her shoes were old and scuffed. She wore a man's dark slouch hat. It framed a face that seemed to be mostly big dark eyes.

A boy of perhaps thirteen, similarly clad, stood with her. He was covertly eyeing the shelves of food and the candy case. Slim saw the meager amounts of beans and flour and the nervous way the girl fingered the few silver coins in her hand as she estimated her purchases carefully. And he saw the wistfulness in the boy's face.

Slim caught Andy's eye and beckoned him aside. "Fill up their grub sack," he whispered. "Put it on my bill."

"I weel go halves with ye," Andy said. "A thruffy Scotsmon I may be, but I ha' a heart in my body, lad."

The girl turned from the counter, her cheeks flushed. "I heard you," she said. "I appreciate it, but we don't need charity. We can pay for what we buy."

It was Slim's turn to redden. He had taken it for granted that she was no more than fifteen or sixteen, and that she would be one of the usual nasal-toned, sallow, poorly educated wanderers who traveled the West, living off the generosity of the ranchers. He had supposed there would be a shiftless father, perhaps drunk in the wagon, or cadging a free drink at the saloons, while he depended on the children to rustle food.

Now Slim saw his mistake. She was at least twenty, though the pinch of toil and short rations might have made her seem older than she was. There was breeding and pride both in her voice and the poise of her head, and in the sensitive cast of her oval face.

Slim removed his hat. "I'm sorry, miss. I figured—"

She smiled wearily. "You needn't apolo-

CHAPTER

2

Feud-Range Orphans

Slim left Warnack standing there and led his horse to Andy Lemon's store.

gize," she hastened to say. "But we'll get along all right. We haven't much farther to go."

Her brother was staring at Slim with wide eyes. "Gee, you're the cowboy that stopped the fight out there, ain't you?" he blurted out. "I sure wish I was big enough to do what you done, mister."

"You will be one of these days, button." Slim grinned. "You aiming to be a cowboy when you grow up?"

"Sure am! My dad was a cowboy once. I'm goin' to own a lot of horses an' cattle, an' I'll—"

"Bud," his sister said. "The gentleman isn't interested in that. Come on. Let's hit the trail."

She turned to Slim. "Thank you again," she said shyly. "We're trying to get to El Paso. We have some folks there."

"But I'm coming back to this range as soon as I git Pat through to the Border," her brother spoke up. "I'm comin' back an' hit you for a job, cowboy."

"I'll be looking for you," Slim said gravely.

ANDY LEMON sighed as they both stood watching the girl drive the bony team away. "Gosh, the world is all wrong, lad. Greedy men wi' more money than they ken what to do wit' fight for additional wealth, while yon lass an' the tad struggle an' starve."

"Who are they, Andy?"

"Darnell is the name. They ha' traveled from Nebraska. Cholera took the mother, then the father, leavin' them alone an' penniless. El Paso is still far away. Their horses wi' never last the trip."

Slim filled his grub sack. As he carried it to his horse, his eyes lighted. Yvonne Warnack was riding into town, mounted on a smooth-gaited strawberry mare. She was wearing a short, fringed riding skirt, and a blue silk waist that matched her eyes. Small, with round eyes and yellow, fluffy hair and a piquant face, she was accustomed to the attention of men.

She waved at Slim, galloped up and dismounted. "I waited at the ranch, expecting you to call and side me to town," she said accusingly. "But it seems you have forgotten me."

She filled the world for Slim. She was beautiful, alluring, provocative. She acted

on him like a drug. She was smiling up at him, and then her attention was attracted by the tramp of boots.

Her father appeared from Big Ed's bar-room down the street with Concho Jack at his side. Filing after them were their ten fighting men. They moved with a certain grimness to their horses, mounted, and came riding by.

Yvonne's father halted. "We're going up on Houserock Mesa to look for some of our beef that may have strayed there," he said. "You coming with us, Marlin?"

Slim stood silent a moment. These men were not going to hunt straying cattle. That was the baldest kind of an excuse for invading Houserock Mesa, which was the accepted southern limit of Jud Stottler's range. They were going up there to invite trouble, hoping for an incentive to wipe out the Stottlers with a quick thrust before Jud Stottler could import additional fighting men.

"No," Slim said curtly. "I've no cause to go up there, Milt. And neither have you."

Warnack's cloudy eyes slitted. "Are you trying to give me advice, Marlin?" he asked sharply.

Concho Jack chuckled scornfully. "Come on, Yvonne," he addressed the boss' daughter. "Ride with the fighting men. The Stottlers have been forcing trouble on your dad for a long time. I aim to give them a hatful of it. Marlin there thinks he might get hurt. So he'll let us do the fighting and save his range for him."

Yvonne turned on Slim, her eyes suddenly cooling. "Is that right? Aren't you going to help Dad fight those low-down Stottlers?"

Slim was shaken. "Listen, Yvonne—" he began.

But she whirled angrily away and mounted. "When you change your mind, let me know," she called back with a toss of her head.

She rode at Concho Jack's side as the hoofs of the armed party spattered mud in a rush out of town. And Concho Jack's jeering laugh rolled back at Slim Marlin.

THE next afternoon, a cowboy who had quit a riding job at one of the small ranches up the valley, stopped for a moment at Slim's ranch on his way out of the

Tolani country. He had some bad news.

"They've pried up hell an' put a chunk under it," he told Slim. "Milt Warnack an' his tough crew rode up on Houserock Mesa yesterday, huntin' trouble. They got it. The Stottlers ambushed 'em, rubbed out two of Warnack's punchers an' shot up a couple more. Most of the outfits in the valley are throwin' in with Warnack. They figure he'll wipe out the Stottlers sooner or later, and they want to ride the winning horse. As for me, I'm gettin' out."

Slim had been gentling a young horse. He stood there for a time after the puncher had rode on, smoking a cigarette, and staring moodily at nothing. He was thinking of Yvonne Warnack.

His eyes gradually fixed on a thin finger of blue smoke that rose into the windless sky far along the benches west of the ranch house. Slim frowned, saddled a horse, and headed over the benches to investigate. It looked like a campfire, and he wanted no squatters on his grass.

His brows lifted a little as he rode down into a little oak park along a stream and saw the shabby wagon. It was the outfit driven by the Darnell girl. Pat Darnell straightened from the kettle in which she was cooking beans and a fragment of salt pork. She wore no hat now; and her dark, lustrous hair was braided about her head.

"Oh, so it's you!" she said, and Slim did not miss the note of relief.

He turned to find her brother appearing from behind the wagon. Young Bud was lowering the hammers of an old scatter-gun.

"I was afeared that big windbag with the fancy clothes had come back," Bud said. "I was goin' to blast a tunnel through him if he tried to kiss sis ag'in."

Slim turned on the girl, and she was flushing. "It was nothing," she shrugged. "Only a cowboy who tried to be smart. I sent him packing in a hurry."

"It was that big moose who beat up the little cowboy in Showlow yesterday," her brother explained.

"What was Concho Jack doing around here?" Slim asked. "This is my ranch."

"He didn't say," the girl remarked dryly. "But forget it—I can take care of myself. I hope you don't mind if we camp here a day or two. The team played out last night, and we've got to give them a rest.

We'll pay for the grass they eat. I'll send the money by mail as soon as we get to El Paso."

Slim remembered the meager supply of food she had bought. He knew she did not have money to buy more.

"I'm glad I located you two again," he said. "I can use a little help over at my place, if you want to pass the time by earning a little money. My shack needs a house-cleaning, an' a little paint wouldn't do any harm. Bud, there, is husky enough to whitewash my corrals an' barn. I'll pay you in money or grub, as you choose."

The girl eyed him suspiciously. "You're just inventing jobs for us," she charged. "You know we're broke and short of food."

"When you see my shack you'll know I'm telling it straight," Slim grinned. "As for being short on grub, I don't allow that on my ranch. I killed a young beef this mornin', an' most of it'll go to waste unless you give me a hand jerking it. I'll give you a quarter of fresh meat if you'll help me out."

"Beef," the boy exclaimed wistfully. "I ain't had any for so long I forget what it tastes like!"

"Better move your camp nearer my shack," Slim advised. "Fodder is better there, and you won't be bothered by heart-smashers like Concho Jack. Let's clean up this meal you're cookin', then hitch up an' change camp. That pot sure smells great."

Pat Darnell stood fighting with her pride a moment. Her glance turned to her brother, who was awaiting her decision with pathetic, hungry hope. Suddenly she smiled.

"I'll only be too glad to work and earn something," she said. "And both of us are grateful."

CHAPTER

Bushwhack Payment

3

Slim found himself watching her during the meal, following the elusive little lights in her eyes and finding something soothing in the constancy of her smooth features. It came to him that she would be pretty in feminine garb. Then he saw that she was pretty even in the rough jeans and cotton shirt.

She drove the wagon, and Slim piloted the route. Because of coulees and ridges

that fingered out from Houserock Mesa, he was forced to swing westward, nearer the mesa, to find a route feasible for the wagon.

Mounting a rincon between hills, and helping the team with his saddle rope, Slim halted suddenly as he topped the rise. There he sat motionless, staring intently.

Three riders, strung out yards apart, were moving through the scattered scrub oak down a narrow basin ahead. He recognized Fat Stottler's pudgy form and saw the rifles slung on every saddle. They were Pitchfork men, heading out into the valley, and Slim surmised that they were on their way to run a night raid on Milt Warnack's Sidewinder Ranch.

Then the brief reflection of the late afternoon sun on some bright object among a tangled pile of boulders drew his attention. As Slim watched, a rifle shot winked faintly in the sunlight from among those boulders.

Fat Stottler lifted in the saddle, stood poised with head thrown back and arms outspread for an instant, in an attitude of frozen agony. Then he fell, his big bulk dragging the horse off stride and capsizing it.

Slim had seen men fall like that once or twice in the past. He knew that Fat Stottler was dead. A bullet had drilled him through the back.

The hidden rifle whipped pinkish flame again. Another of the Pitchfork men spun in the saddle and toppled. A spur hung in the rigging, and his body bobbed like a limp rag as the horse went to pieces, pitching and sun-fishing to free itself of this terrifying weight.

Slim heard a low moan of horror at his side. Pat Darnell had left the wagon and was standing there. She had seen the double murder. She swayed a little and went white.

He swung down and steadied her slender figure. The last of the Pitchfork riders down there had rammed steel to his horse and had made the cover of scrub oak, with bullets whipping dust around him. Now his rifle began to talk savagely. Spurts of dust struck among the boulders where the killer lay.

The hidden man answered, and again Slim saw the flash of the sun on a golden concho. The murderer's rifle cracked twice, then went silent.

After a time the surviving Pitchfork

rider mounted and sped away, keeping to cover. No bullets struck at him. When he was out of range, he turned back toward the mesa. He was racing to tell Jud Stottler of the death of his oldest son.

Pat Darnell fought off the faintness. "I'm all right," she murmured. "But that sort of made me sick. It was cold-blooded murder."

Slim stood grimly watching the boulders. Nothing moved there. He was wondering why the killer had ceased firing so abruptly. He suddenly mounted.

"Wait here," he warned. "I'm going to take a look."

He galloped down into the narrow valley and dismounted at the base of the shattered heap of boulders. Climbing up among them, he heard a groan. A big man in gaudy, concho-spotted chaps lay face down on a flat slab. A pool of blood was growing beneath him. Concho Jack Saunders.

Slim knelt and turned him over. Concho Jack was alive. A glancing bullet, fired by the Pitchfork rider, had ripped an ugly flesh wound in his shoulder and creased his skull. The shoulder wound was not serious, but it was possible his skull was fractured.

Slim signaled to bring the wagon up. With the help of Pat and Bud Darnell, he lowered Concho Jack from the rocks and lifted him into the wagon. The girl produced bandages and staunches the shoulder wound. She did not shrink from the blood, but Slim saw her aversion for Concho Jack. Fat Stottler and the other Pitchfork man were dead. Slim covered them with tarps and left them there.

"We'll move him to my shack," Slim decided. "Bud can ride to Showlow for a doctor. No telling how bad his skull's creased."

Pat looked at him. "And the sheriff too?" she questioned. "He murdered two men."

Slim shook his head. "Let the Stottlers bring the sheriff, if they want to go to the law," he said.

TWILGILF had come when they hugged Concho Jack's limp form into Slim's house and placed it on the bunk. Slim caught up a pony from his cavy and headed young Bud Darnell down the Showlow trail, with curt instructions to bring a doctor and keep his mouth shut.

Returning to the house, Slim found the girl bathing Concho Jack's scalp injury. "I doubt if he's badly hurt," she remarked. "A concussion perhaps, but he's beginning to show signs of reviving."

Slim's glance lifted and traveled out through the open door. Fast-moving shadows were crossing the oak flat beyond the creek. Galloping horses now splashed through the ford. Slim turned, lifted a rifle from deer horns on the wall, loaded it, and stood it beside the door.

"Stay out of sight," he warned the girl as he stepped out. "It's Jud Stottler an' some of his cowboys. I didn't figure they would get here so sudden. There's no cause for you to get mixed up in this mess."

He closed the door and stood in front of it as five riders swung up from the ford. They threw their lathered mounts back when they made out his silent figure in the dusk.

Old Jud Stottler peered close. "Is that you, Marlin?" he challenged. "Where's Concho Jack Saunders? We trailed the wagon here."

"Why do you ask?" Slim returned.

"You know why. He rimrocked my son an' Ed Johnson this afternoon. We come to git him. We know he was wounded; we saw the blood an' the marks where he was lifted out of the rocks."

"He's inside," Slim said. "But you won't want him, Jud."

"Why not?" the old cowman rasped. "The skunk ain't cashed in his chips already, I hope!"

"No, but he's wounded and unconscious. He's got a creased skull."

"Come on, boys!" Stottler grated savagely. "I only hope he comes to in time to know me before I kill him."

Slim's voice sharpened. "Hold it, Jud! You can't kill a wounded man, not even a snake like Concho Jack."

Jud Stottler checked his horse again, grinding out an oath. "Git outa the way, Marlin," he thundered. "Chad told me how you saved him from Saunders in Showlow the other day, so don't deal yourself any misery by tryin' to protect Saunders from us now. He murdered my boy."

"Go get the sheriff, Jud," Slim said. "I'll turn Concho Jack over to Dave Break, but not to you."

"You've throwed in with Warnack after all, huh!" Stottler rasped angrily. "Well, listen: I heard you was sweet on Warnack's daughter, and everybody knows Concho Jack has the same intentions. Here's your chance to git rid of him, Marlin. Yuh know no jury will dare convict one of Milt Warnack's killers. He swings too much weight in this county. So we're takin' the law in our own hands. Stand aside, Marlin. On account of what you did for Chad, I've been patient. But my patience is about wore out."

"Ride him down," one of the four riders snarled. "Ed Johnson was the best pal I ever had. Let's go!"

FURY drove them. Slim saw a rider at Jud Stottler's left side move quickly in the saddle and reach for his holster. Slim's gun whipped into his hand and thundered twice. He fired high, knowing what the shots would do to the horses. The Pitchfork rider triggered at Slim, but his aim was upset as his mount went into the air with a bawl of terror. Jud Stottler and the others were drawing, but their animals were pitching and rearing also.

Slugs whistled past Slim, smacking into the 'dobe walls. With a growl of regret he backed through the door into the house and barred it.

The Pitchfork men mastered their horses, dismounted, and battered at the door with bullets.

"Open up an' come out with yore hands in the air, you damn fool!" Jud Stottler bawled. "Or, by hell, Marlin, we'll burn you out!"

A bullet smashed a window pane, screaming across the room. It came within inches of Pat Darnell, who stood by the bunk on which Concho Jack was stirring.

Slim leaped to her and pushed her to the floor, blowing out the lamp as he did so. Pat's narrow escape had chilled him. Then fury began to rage in his veins.

"Hold your fire, Stottler," he yelled. "There's a girl in here. Give her a chance to leave so she won't get hurt."

"To hell with her!" Stottler shouted. "It's that Warnack heifer, I reckon. You know how to save her, Marlin—open that door an' come out with your hands in the air. We'll let you an' her go. All we want is Concho Jack."

Conflicting emotions tore at Slim. Every instinct revolted at the thought of turning over a helpless man to these blood-maddened avengers. He had a hunch that Concho Jack would not die easy in the hands of the frenzied old cowman. It was whispered that Jed Stottler had "Apached" a man once in the past. But on the other hand, there was Pat Darnell. She had moved to his side now, and her soft shoulder brushed him.

"You can't let them have him, even if he is a murderer," she breathed urgently. "Don't worry about me. These walls are thick, and we can stand them off. I heard what he said about the girl you're in love with. If you surrender Concho Jack to them, she'll always hold it against you."

Slim lifted his voice. "Yvonne Warnack isn't in here," he called. "This girl was traveling through and got mixed up in this when I used her wagon to bring Saunders here. Let her walk out without being hurt, Stottler. This isn't her fight."

The answer was a furious blast of bullets. Jud Stottler, cursing frenziedly, emptied a six-shooter into a window. The slugs wailed eerily across the room.

"There's yore answer, Marlin," Stottler bellowed. "If you're stubborn enough to sacrifice her life for that skunk, don't blame nobody but yourself. How about it?"

Slim moved to the window. His teeth were set and black fury ripped at him. He picked out movement against the darkening brush line, and his gun spat twice.

He heard Jud Stottler utter an oath of pain, then dive to deeper cover. "Let him have it boys," Stottler raged. "He pinked me; he's askin' for it. Tear that shack down with bullets."

Slim leaped to the bunk and dragged Concho Jack's body to the floor. He turned and held Pat down, protecting her with his own body as hot lead beat at the house. The door shook to the impact of slugs. Splinters leaped from its planks. The room was alive with the buzz and snap and wail of flying lead.

But the windows were high, and the dobe wall was thick. Broken glass stung them. A fragment from a ricochet gouged Slim's forehead. The girl squirmed and angrily protested his protection.

Jud Stottler's shout silenced the guns. "How about it now, Marlin?"

Slim did not answer. He stood by a window, waiting grimly. Jud Stottler was brutally using the girl's danger as a threat to gain his own ends.

Slim heard movements in the shadows, hoarse murmurs, then the thud of feet. They had started a rush. Perhaps Jud Stottler believed he and the girl had been killed by that last fusillade.

CHAPTER

4

Killer's Deadline

Slim picked out a running form, notched relentlessly and knocked the man over. He veered his sights and threw a bullet at Jud Stottler's vague bulk. But the wily old cowman had turned back at that first shot, and Slim's bullets only threw streamers of dust around him. Then the darkness swallowed the retreating men, though their maddened cursing was plain enough.

"Damn you, Marlin!" Jud Stottler screeched. "You downed Link Cloud. He's layin' out there, groanin'."

"One of you drag him away," Slim spat. "I don't make war on wounded men."

After a time that was done. Then guns began to cross-fire the house with methodical purpose. Bullets came sweeping in through windows from all sides. Men with rifles had scaled trees at a distance, and poured slugs downward. The number of guns indicated that Stottler had been reinforced by at least three or four more of his men.

Concho Jack began to mumble wildly. Slim crawled to him. "Lay quiet, Saunders," he warned. "The Stottlers are out there, tryin' to get you."

"Good Lord, don't let 'em have me, Marlin!" Concho Jack panted in terror. "That old devil would torture me!"

"Couldn't blame him much," Slim remarked, and moved back to Pat Darnell's side.

The firing died and Stottler again shouted a challenge that Slim did not answer. At last Slim heard the creak of wheels. They were moving Pat Darnell's wagon, which stood in the shadow of the barn.

Slim's lips tightened in the darkness. There was a little knoll lifting directly from the shack on the east side, and he real-

ized that a fire-devil could be rolled down from that direction. It was a standard method of roasting out besieged men.

Pat's hand crept into his. "They're going to burn us out," she murmured.

"I'll injun up on that knoll pretty soon an' discourage 'em," he told her with more confidence than he felt.

The creak of wheels grew distant, and then they could hear dry brush being gathered and piled in the wagon.

Slim had Concho Jack's six-shooter, as well as his own. He took the rifle also, and moved to the door. But Pat caught at his arm.

"Isn't there any other way?" she gasped. "They'll be expecting you to come out. You may be killed!"

Slim drew away and opened the door. Instantly a gun lashed at him from the darkness, and he reeled back. A slug had creased his left thigh. Jud Stottler had left one man to watch the door of the house.

Slim fired twice, but his hand was uncertain. The shock of the wound had driven nausea through him. Pat dragged him back as a second slug whistled by. Then she barred the door again.

Slim, fighting off the shock of the wound, saw a red glow leap above the little knoll that was in view through the east window. It increased, and the wagon, its canvas top bursting into fiery streamers, crept into view. The wagon was being snaked to the crest by ropes passed around oak trees. The horses and riders supplying the power were hidden on the opposite slope of the knoll. Then the fire devil was careening madly down the rise, straight toward the besieged shack.

Slim straightened. He had caught the vibration of galloping hoofs, communicated through the earth. Somewhere a man shouted, and a six-shooter pounded. Other guns chimed in. The flaming wagon struck a small rock and swerved from its course of destruction.

Riders swept into view, silhouetted against the fire. Slim identified Milt Warnack's squat figure among them. He heard wild horsemen sweep away on the opposite side of the house and into the creek. Jud Stottler and his crew were fleeing in the face of the overwhelming number of Sidewinder men.

After a time Milt Warnack and some of his riders rode to the shack. Young Bud Darnell was among them. The boy's eyes were bright with excitement, and he was proud of himself.

"I seen the Stottlers comin' for the house as I rode away," he explained. "So instead of goin' for a doctor, I cut the breeze across range to the Sidewinder spread to bring help."

Milt Warnack slapped Slim on the shoulder. "I knew I could count on you when the pinch came, Slim," he said genially. "You saved Concho Jack's life. I reckon he'll remember that."

Warnack offered his hand, but somehow Slim did not seem to see it. "Take him out of here, Milt," he said. "He smells up the place. I'll have to fumigate after he's gone."

A doctor arrived after a while, and dressed Slim's injury. It would keep him out of the saddle only a day or two. After the doctor and the Sidewinder men had departed, taking Concho Jack with them, Slim saw Pat and her brother staring dismally at the smouldering ruins of their wagon.

"I'll see that you get a new outfit," Slim told them. "In the meantime, this house is your home."

AT NOON the next day, Sheriff Dave Breck pulled into the ranch. He eyed the bullet-shattered windows and door without comment. Slim sat in a chair in the shade, with his bandaged leg propped up, and the sheriff talked of the weather until Pat Darnell was out of hearing.

Then he produced a subpoena. "Jud Stottler filed a murder charge ag'in Concho Jack this mornin', Slim," he said. "He names you as an eye-witness. I reckon the trial will be held Saturday. Court's in session then. I arrested Concho an hour ago, an' he's on his way to the calaboose by this time. That lump on his head don't amount to much. He waived a hearin'."

The sheriff pulled on his gloves. "I'll let you know the date of the trial," he said. "An' I want you to show up. You're the chief prosecution witness."

That afternoon Milt Warnack and his daughter came galloping up, surrounded by a bodyguard of armed men. In their wake was a buckboard, tooled by an oldtimer.

Yvonne was a pretty picture in new,

FEUDISTS, KEEP OUT!

sand-hued riding breeches and stiff hat and white silk waist. She ran to Slim, and brushed his cheeks with her little red lips. "That's for your bravery," she declared. "You were wonderful last night."

Then she straightened. Pat Darnell had come to the door. Pat's forehead was damp, and there was a smudge of dust on the tip of her nose. She held a broom. She had been cleaning up the house. Her brother peered around a corner, then retreated to the woodpile and resumed work.

"So you're the girl Dad told me about," Yvonne remarked, after inspecting Pat. "Of course, we will pay for that wagon that was burned. We'll see that you get a better one. You did us a great service in helping save Dad's range boss."

Pat's cheeks took on deeper, ruddier color. "You mean helping a murderer escape what was coming to him," she snapped, and turned back into the house.

Yvonne's eyes hardened. She turned to Slim. "I'm going to take you over to the Sidewinder," she said. "You'll be more comfortable there. Mother and I will see that you get the best of care."

"Thanks." Slim shrugged. "But there's no need for that. I'm no invalid. I'll be riding inside of two days. I'll stay here and look after things."

It was Yvonne Warnack's turn to whirl petulantly away. "Perhaps there are reasons why you prefer to stay here," she flashed, with a scornful glance at the house where Pat's broom could be heard.

Slim eyed her flatly, seeing her as an utter stranger. Milt Warnack squatted beside him then and smiled suavely.

"Jud Stottler is charging Concho Jack with murder," he said softly. "You're named as an eye-witness. Of course they can't make that charge stick. It's ridiculous. Fat Stottler and that other killer was belied in a coulee, layin' for Concho. They smoked him up, put a slug in him. He notched on 'em as they came up to finish the job."

"Is that the way Concho will tell it?" Slim asked.

Warnack arose, and one eyelid quivered. "Yeah. An' that's the way you saw it too, hey, Slim?"

Slim did not answer. He sat there watching Yvonne Warnack as she rode away



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Now the prosecutor faced his last and most important witness without much hope. Ben Keene knew that Slim had courted Yvonne Warnack, and so did every man in the room.

"The prosecutor established Slim's presence on the scene, then stepped back. "Now tell what you saw there, Marlin," he said. "Tell the truth—in your own words, without fear or favor, without hope of reward or penalty either from the law or other sources."

Slim looked at Concho Jack, who lolled confidently in the prisoner's chair, apparently bored. Concho Jack had a patch of court plaster fastened to the back of his head.

"I saw three riders moving east, down the draw," Slim said. "One was Fat Stottler. The other two I didn't recognize. From a scatter of high boulders off to their left a rifle was fired. The first bullet seemed to strike Fat Stottler in the back. He was dead before he hit the ground."

Milt Warnack had risen partly from his seat and was glaring with a stricken snarl of rage. Coucho Jack had lost his cocksure attitude. He was bending forward, his big hands clamped on the arms of his chair, his eyes burning.

Slim went on: "A second later another rider was shot by the man in the rocks. He hung in the stirrup, and if the bullet didn't kill him, the horse did as it dragged him. The third rider made cover, fired about a dozen rounds, then rode away.

"I scouted the boulders and found a man lying there," Slim continued. "He was wounded. That man was Concho Jack, the defendant. His rifle lay beside him, and there were empty shells around. I took him to my ranch, fought off a band of lynchers who tried to take him, and finally turned him over to the Sidewinder crew. That's all I know."

Ben Keene moved to the witness chair and pumped Slim's hand fervently. "I didn't think any man had the guts," he breathed. He turned and addressed the Court. "The state closes its testimony, your honor," he said triumphantly.

"Any cross-examination?" the Court asked.

There was wild consultation at the defense table. Warnack and Kelso Miller

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were whispering furiously, and Warnack was pounding a fist on the table.

The defense lawyer arose and charged upon Slim. "Isn't it true that you and the defendant nearly came to blows in the street of this town only the day previous to this affair?"

"Yes," Slim said.

"And isn't it also true that the defendant offered to fight you then and there, like a man, but you refused?"

Slim smiled coldly. "No."

The lawyer paused and snapped his fingers at the jury as he put the next question. "And isn't it also true that you and the defendant have been at odds over the favor of a certain young lady, whom we all respect? It is also true, I believe, that she disdained you and made it plain that Concho Jack Saunders, a brave, up-standing man, is the one of her choice. You resented that and—"

Slim came from the witness chair, and his fist exploded over Kelso Miller's florid jaw. The punch lifted the oily attorney in a somersault over the counsel table into Concho Jack's lap.

"There's your answer," Slim said without raising his voice.

SHERIFF DAVE BRECK and two deputies leaped to tables with buckshot guns in their hands. "I'll blast the first man that pulls a gun," the sheriff bawled over the uproar.

The judge's gavel at last made itself heard. "The witness is sentenced to thirty days in jail for contempt of court," he intoned. "Sentence suspended, pending his good behavior. Is the defense ready to proceed?"

Kelso Miller, furious and disheveled, finally was able to talk. "No more questions," he growled.

Prosecutor Ben Keene came to his feet. "I have a new witness, your honor," he said. "One who has just appeared. She declares she was also an eye-witness to the murder."

Slim whirled, as the courtroom buzzed. Pat Darnell had entered during the turmoil and was now standing there beside Ben Keene.

Pat smiled tremulously at Slim as she passed him and took the stand. She testified

FEUDISTS, KEEP OUT!

in a low, clear voice, and her story was a corroboration of Slim's testimony.

She was not cross-examined. The final arguments were made then, and Kelso Miller hung his plea for exoneration on hints of a frame-up, and on prejudice on the part of the state's witnesses.

When the jury filed out, Concho Jack had again assumed his swaggering attitude of bravado. His confidence was justified. The jury was out deliberating only ten minutes.

The verdict was, "Not Guilty."

The sheriff and his deputies leaped up and ordered the court cleared at once. Jud Stottler and his men were sullen and bitter, but the odds were too great against them here. Stottler strode to where Slim stood and extended his hand.

Slim did not move. "I don't shake hands with you, Stottler," he grated. "You would have killed a girl that night. You're no better than another bigoted, grass-hungry, selfish man in this room. You two care for nothing but yourselves. You ruin this range, ruin lives, and send men to their deaths just to flatter your mule-headed pride. Some day this range will realize the truth. Then they'll stop this feud in the way it can be ended the easiest—by wiping both of you off the face of the earth!"

Jud Stottler stepped back, snarling. And Milt Warnack turned, his underslung face working with rage. Their ancient feud forgotten for the instant as they glared with hatred at the only man who had ever had the courage to tell them the truth.

The Stottlers filed out, and the courtroom emptied. Slim and Pat were the last to leave. Her hand was in his arm as they passed through the outer doors. They were outcasts, hated by both sides in the range war, and shunned by the lesser men.

Then Pat's grasp on his arm tightened in fear.

CONCHO JACK SAUNDERS, surrounded by his Sidewinder fighting men, stood across the street, with Milt Warnack in the background. Concho Jack was packing a gun now, and he stood hands on hips, glaring at the two lone figures on the courthouse steps.

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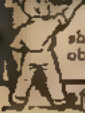
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

from somewhere. "The girl's no better than Marlin."

Slim held Pat's arm, and they descended into the street. He walked through the dust toward Concho Jack Saunders, but a slight, determined figure intervened. It was Yvonne Warnack. She had a quirt in her hand, and she blocked Slim's path.

"You liar!" she screamed.

She raised the quirt, but with a little cry of rage Pat Darnell leaped and tore it from her grasp.

"You beasts!" Pat said, glaring around. "You crawling worms! You freed a murderer today, and now you grovel and fawn before the man who paid him to shoot two men in the back!" Breathlessly, she whirled on Yvonne Warnack. "And you!" she cried. "You were willing to sell yourself for the sake of a few more acres of land, a few more cattle. You used yourself to lure men into helping your father in his selfishness. Get out; the sight of you makes me sick!"

Concho Jack had advanced with a growl of anger. His huge hand reached to grasp Pat's arm, but Slim moved forward, and his fist drove a bare six inches. Concho Jack's knees buckled suddenly, and he sat down.

Slim heard Pat's choked scream of warning and suddenly turned.

Milt Warnack stood thirty feet away, his legs apart, his six-shooter rising into his hand.

And then Milt Warnack's body twitched and leaped. His gun exploded, but the bullet that had thudded deep and hard into him from somewhere beyond Slim's range of vision had thrown off his bead. From across the street, a coil of gunsmoke drove into the hot afternoon sunlight.

Old Jud Stottler stood there. He had fired the shot. And now he fired again, and again, the reports coming in a long roll of gun-thunder.

Warnack went down. Some awful power of will brought him to his knees. He lifted his six-shooter and fired. Jud Stottler pitched back against a building, dead. Then Milt Warnack sagged forward on his face in the dust of the street, coughing out his life.

Then an instinctive perception of danger jerked Slim's eyes to Concho Jack. The

FEUDISTS, KEEP OUT!

big man had shifted to his knees, and his gun was just swinging up.

SSLIM'S .45 was in his hand. He fired with the instantaneous sureness of muscular reflex. The bullet struck Concho Jack Saunders squarely over the heart, driving him back in the dust. There he writhed a moment and then lay still.

The Sidewinder men aroused from their trance, began drawing their weapons. They were met with a blast of gunfire from Stottler's ten men, who were hunkered at building corners across the street.

Slim lifted Pat and turned to run with her to shelter. He found Yvonne Warnack still there in the line of fire, frozen by her peril. He caught her arm and dragged her with him, diving behind a watering trough.

For a minute the battle went on with demoniacal fury. Then the heavier boom of a buckshot gun rolled through the slam of six-shooters. Slim saw Sheriff Dave Breck and his deputies disarming men and putting an end to the fight.

There was little resistance. The end of the Tolani range war had come when Jud Stottler and Milt Warnack killed each other there in the dust. With them had gone the inspiration and the driving force of the feud.

Slim stood up, lifting Pat Darnell with him. Milt Warnack and Jud Stottler still lay there motionless in the dust, and Concho Jack Saunders' big form was sprawled grotesquely nearby. Yvonne Warnack lay sobbing and whimpering in the shelter of the trough, and Slim left her there.

He took Pat away from that grim scene in the street, away from the curious crowds. He took her in his arms, and his voice was not as steady as her own now.

"I love you," he said. "You're brave and sweet. But above everything else you're the kind of a woman I'd fight the world for."

Pat kissed him, laughing and crying at the same time. "I never want you to have to fight anyone for me," she said. "But if it comes to that, well, then—we'll fight side by side . . ."

THE END

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(Continued from page 88)

Ahead of him the road made an abrupt turn. It was here that trouble slapped at him with startling suddenness. It met him in the form of dirty sheets waving in front of hooded faces, gunfire that set his horses rearing and snorting in terror. The off horse came down with his feet over the edge, pawed frantically to regain his footing, sent loose shale rattling down the mountainside. Under his pawing hoofs the bank gave way, and he slid, dragging the other horse and the wagon with him.

Boyle jerked the hood from the man whose arms were wrapped around him. The face of Lobo Jergens leered back at him, his features distorted with fear.

THE edge of the cliff was rushing toward them as they rolled and skidded and slid with nothing but a thousand-foot drop below. The talus-covered slope was sliding, too, with a rumble that was increasing to a roar.

They had hit against a slanting side of the boulder, but now they were beginning to slide again, slowly at first. Cliff Boyle reached out desperately, frantically trying to find a handhold on the rock's surface. His clutching fingers held briefly here and there, slowing their sliding progress downward to an inch at a time, but each movement brought them nearer the edge. The

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SATAN'S MAN FRIDAY

had a chance to set himself, knocking him off-balance, sending him backward across the rock's surface. Jergens tottered there on the edge, the terror in his eyes awful to see as he fought to regain his balance. It was the first time Boyle had ever seen such terrible fear in a man's eyes. It made him sick.

Jergens fell, his wildly waving arms trying desperately to find something to clutch on to, his scream following him down and down, until abruptly it choked off.

With his whole body numb from reaction, Cliff Boyle walked stiff-legged to the gun that Jergens had dropped. The gun was jammed, all right. Jergens must have smashed it against a rock when they rolled down the slope. A little thing, but Jergens was dead, and he was alive. It could so easily have been the other way around.

The thoughts were broken by the sound of a voice above him. He looked up and saw Ike Brady staring down at him. "Don't 'spect you'd reach this point so soon or me an' the sheriff woulda come earlier. I'll throw down a rope."

Some minutes later Boyle pulled his body over the rim. He looked at the lax body of Spade Nugget.

"We got here just in time to polish off Nugget and see you finish off Jergens," Ike Brady said.

"You play rough," Sheriff Harper said with dry humor.

"It was Jergens who ambushed Ira Walker."

"Figgered so but couldn't prove it," said the sheriff. "Reckon the courts will turn his freight line over to you and Walker to operate. Part damages to both of you."

"In that case," Cliff Boyle answered with a tired smile, "I better hunt up some drivers for the wagons. As of right now I'm going back in the hardware business. Not so exciting, but chances are my skin all stays in one piece!"



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